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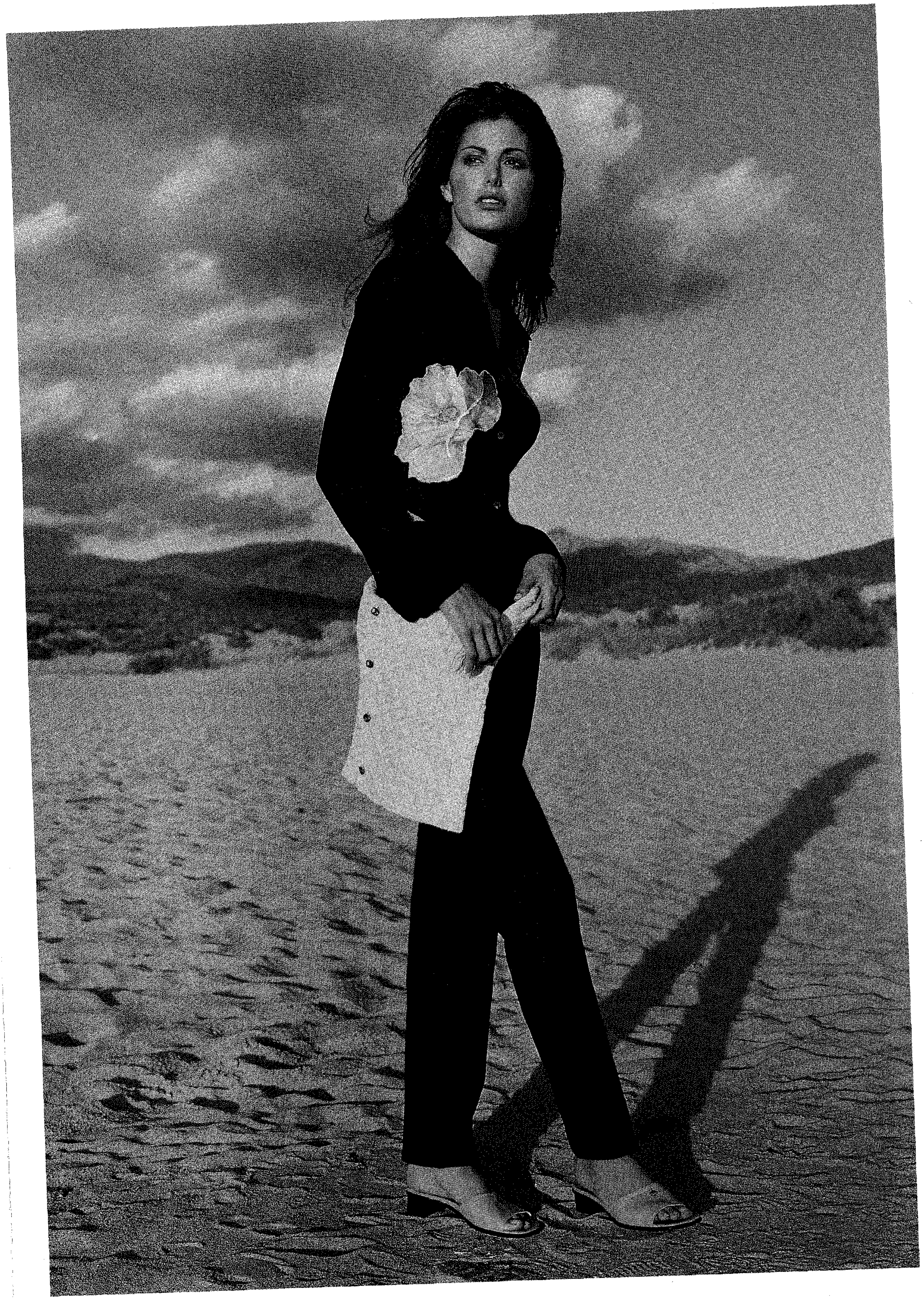
FEB. 21 & 28, 2000



THE NEW YORKER
75TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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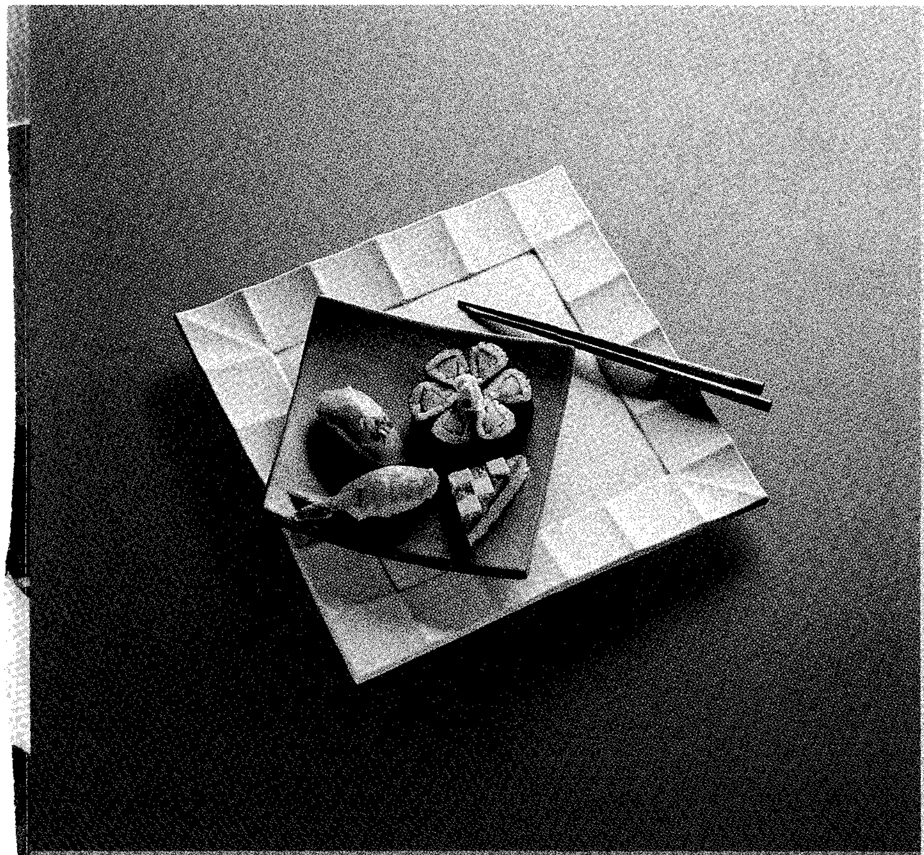

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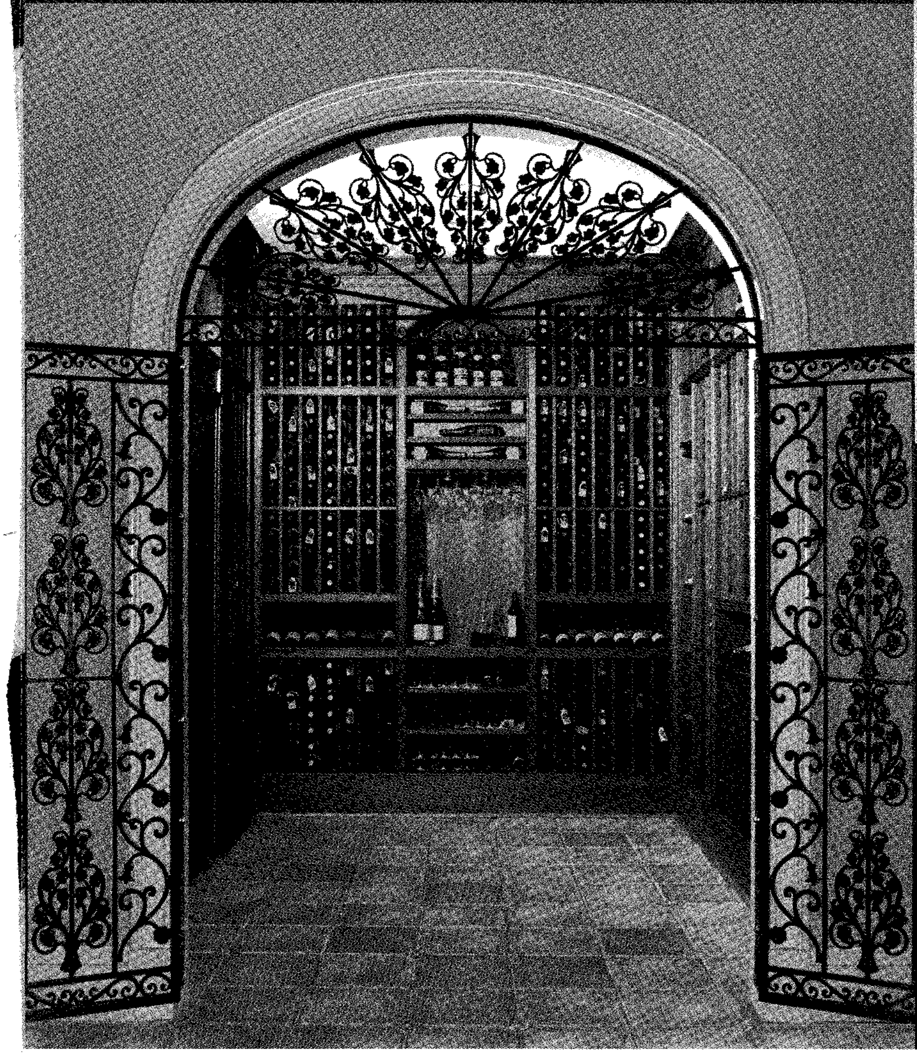

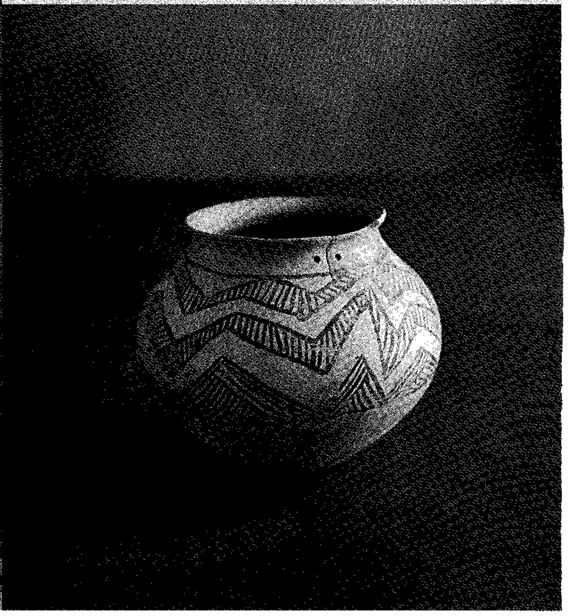

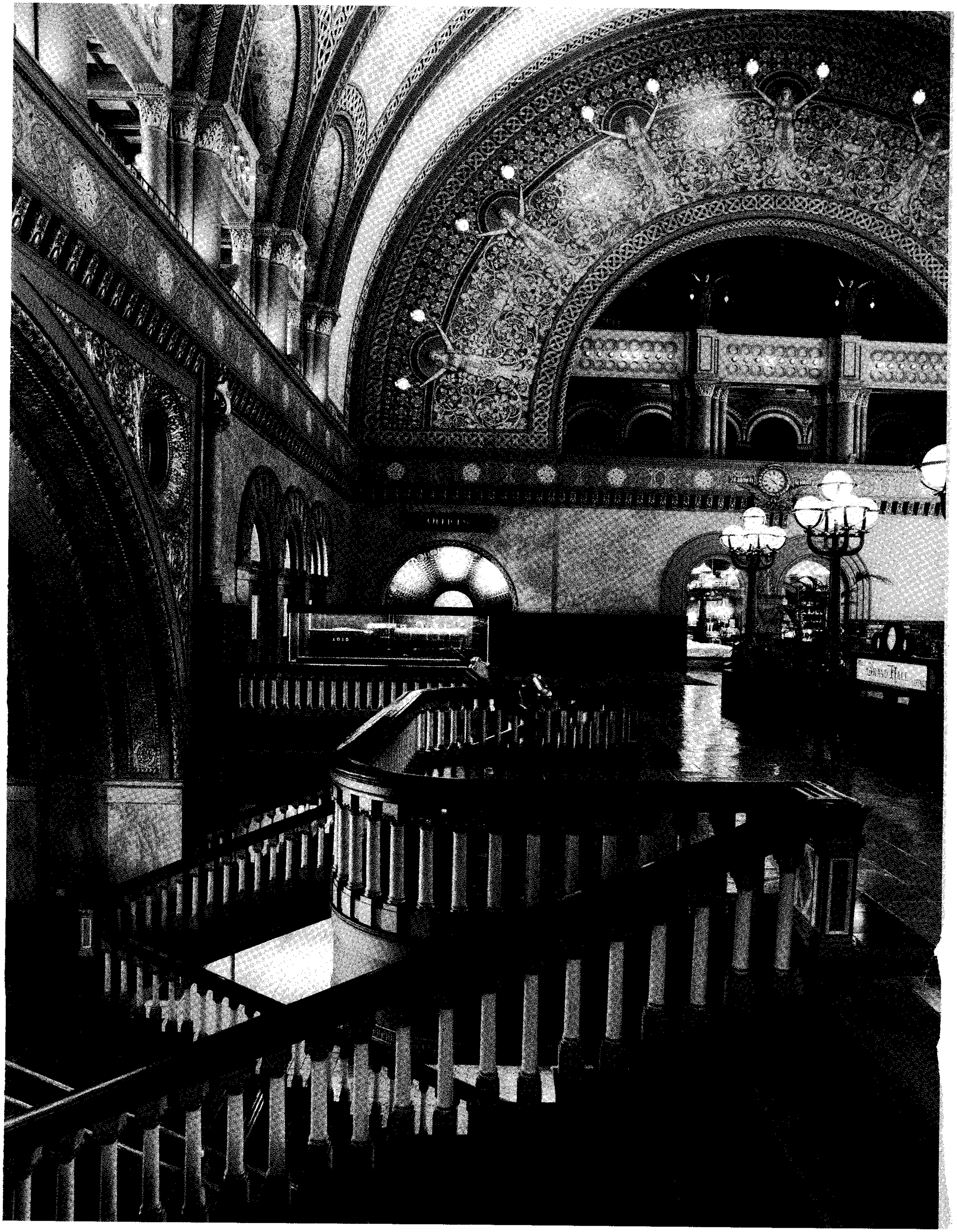
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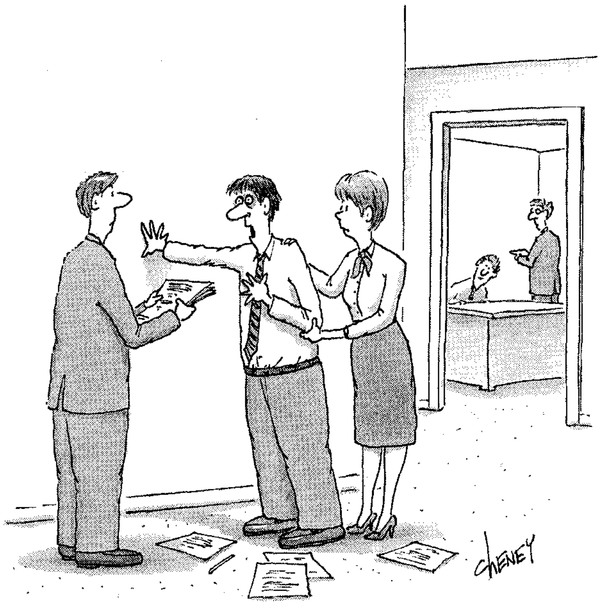

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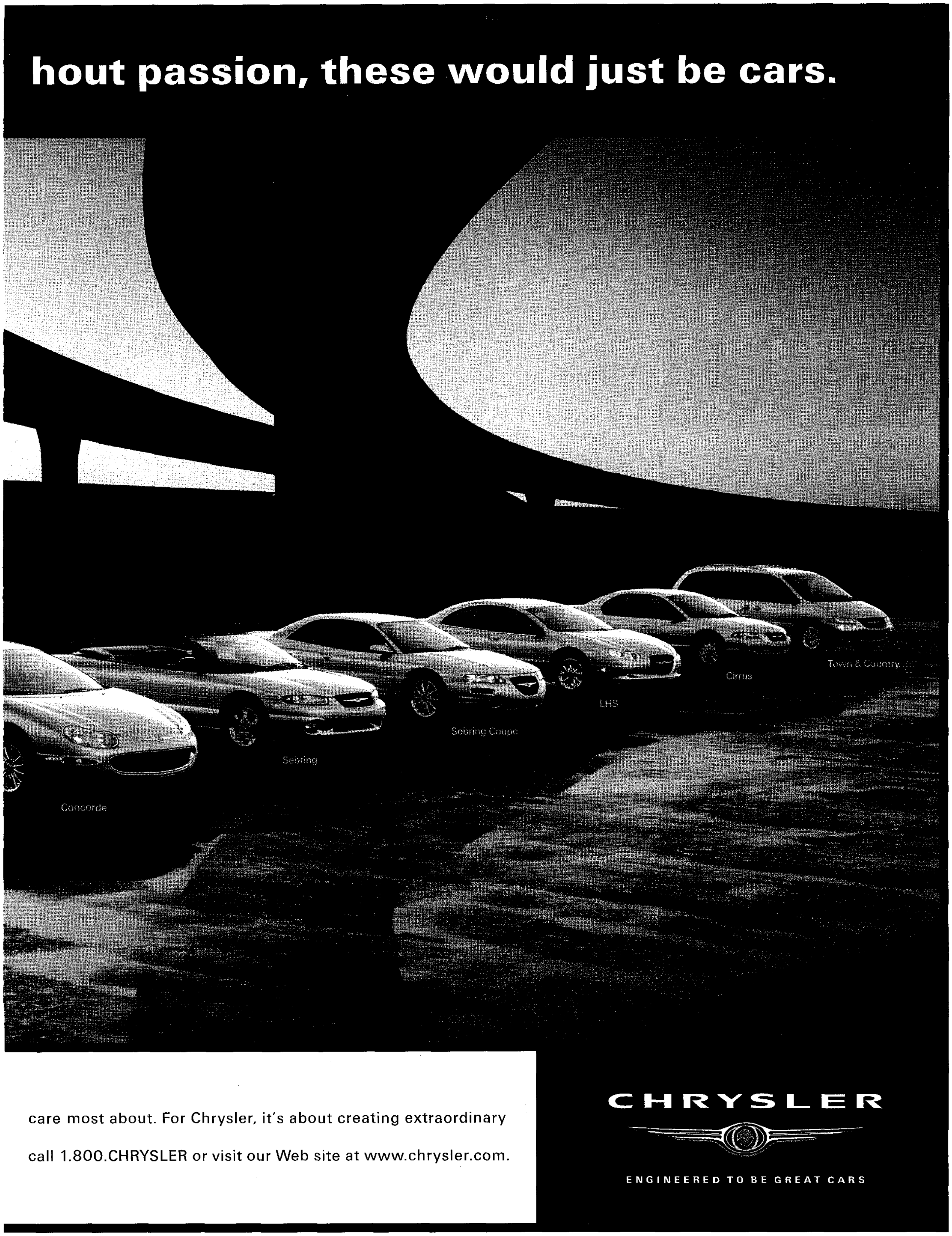
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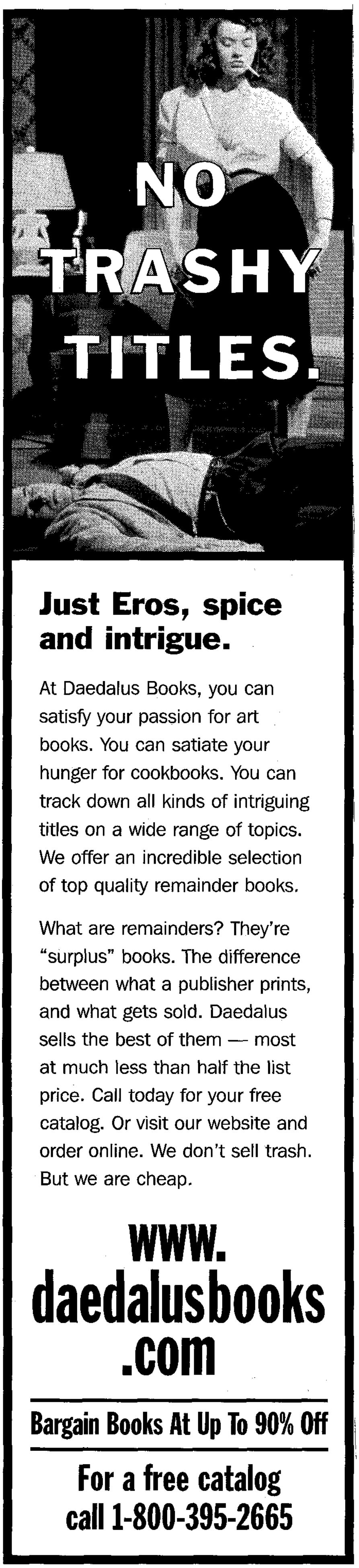

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CONTRIBUTORS

Joan Didion (A Critic at Large, p. 270) is the author, most recently, of the novel "The Last Thing He Wanted."

John Lahr ("Making It Real," p. 196) is the magazine's senior drama critic. "Show and Tell," a collection of his *New Yorker* Profiles, will come out next fall.

Janet Malcolm ("Travels with Chekhov," p. 238) has been writing for the magazine since 1963. Her latest book is "The Crime of Sheila McGough."

John Updike (Books, p. 280) is the author of fifty-one books, including, most recently, "More Matter" and the novel "Gertrude and Claudius."

Saul Steinberg (Portfolio, p. 216), who died last year, was a *New Yorker* artist for more than fifty years. He published several collections of his work, including "The Discovery of America."

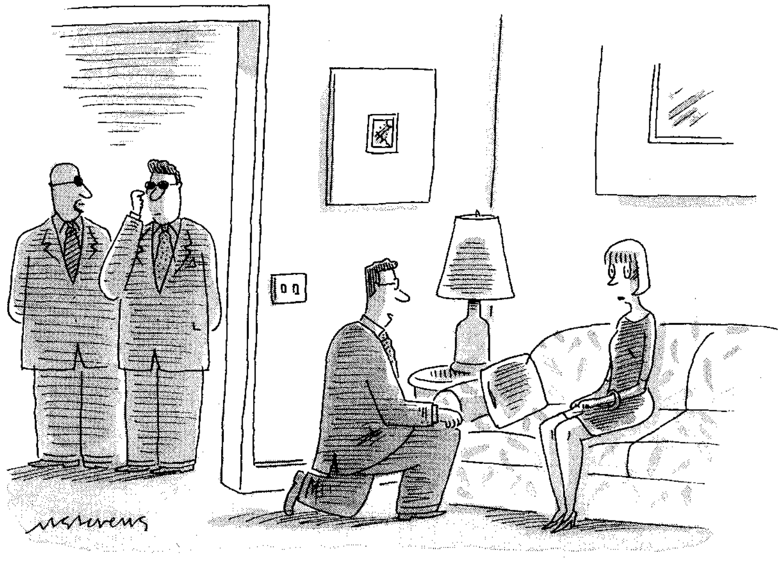
Roger Angell ("The King of the Forest," p. 120) has been a contributor to *The New Yorker* since 1944 and a fiction editor at the magazine since 1956.

Alice Munro (Fiction, p. 254) has published a novel, "Lives of Girls and Women," and eight collections of stories.

Woody Allen (Fiction, p. 148) is the director of more than thirty films. This is his first contribution to *The New Yorker* since 1980.

Jon Lee Anderson ("The Old Man and the Boy," p. 224) is the author of "Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life." He lived in Havana, Cuba, for three years.

Wendy Wasserstein ("Complications," p. 87) is a playwright. Her new play, "Old Money," will be produced by the Lincoln Center Theatre next season.



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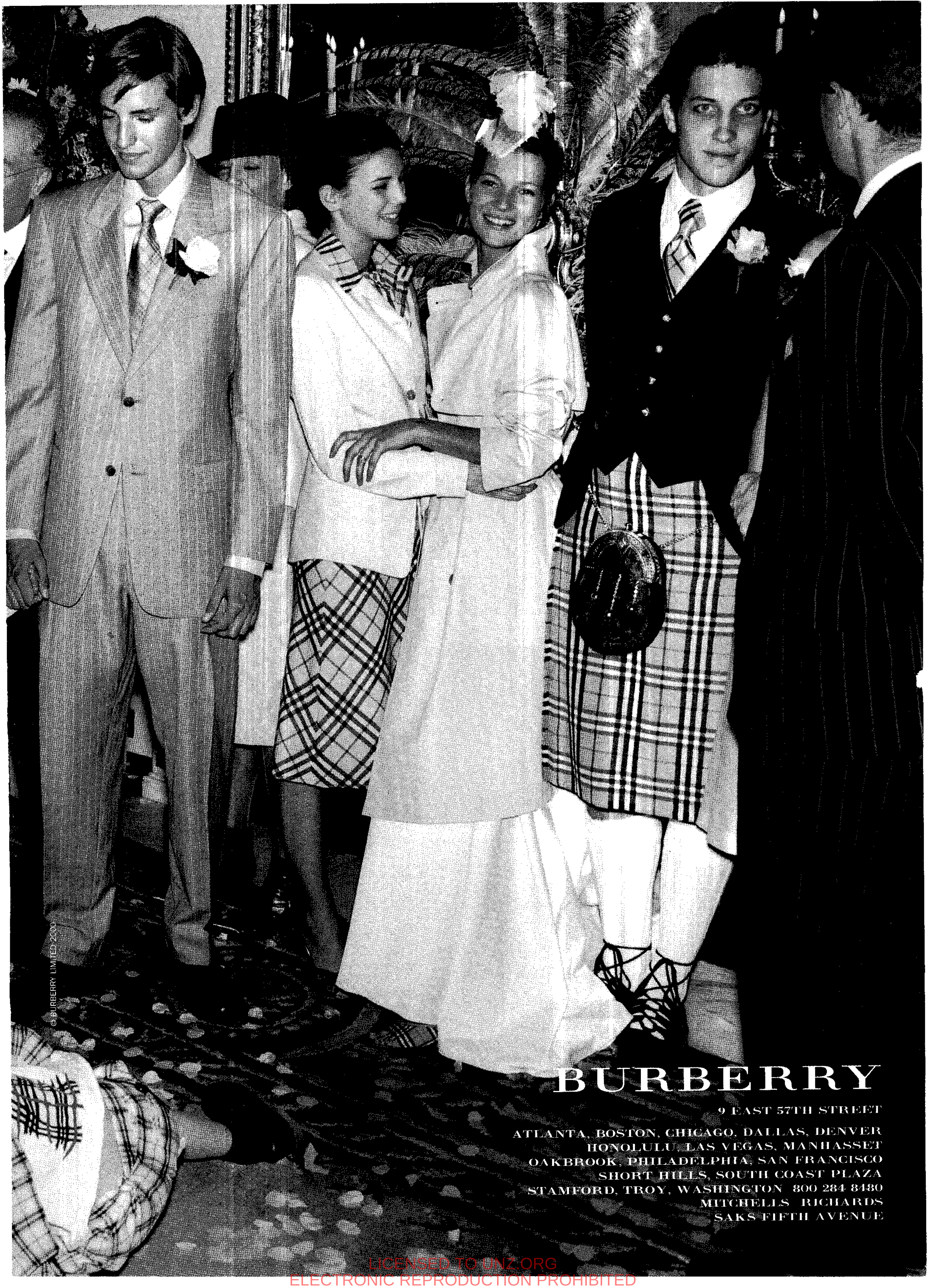

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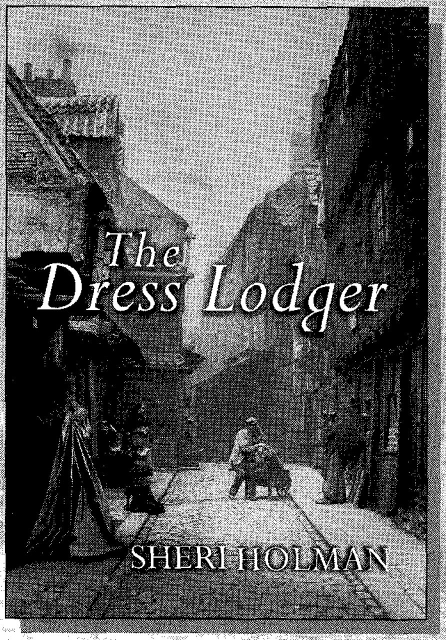

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CONTRIBUTORS

Elizabeth Bishop (Poems, p. 215) published most of her poems in *The New Yorker*. A posthumous collection of unfinished poems, "Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box," will come out next year.

Adam Gopnik ("A Hazard of No Fortune," p. 183) has been writing for the magazine since 1986. His book "Paris to the Moon" will be published next fall.

Susan Orlean ("Madame President," p. 110) is the author of three books, including "Saturday Night" and "The Orchid Thief."

Edward Sorel (Easel, p. 232) has contributed more than thirty-five covers to *The New Yorker* since 1992. He also has illustrated a dozen children's books.

Hendrik Hertzberg (Easel, p. 233) first contributed to *The New Yorker* in 1969 and rejoined the magazine in 1992.

Anthony Lane (Comment, p. 33) has been a film critic here since 1993.

William Wegman (Cover) has been photographing his dogs for thirty years. "Fay," a book about one of his dog models, was published last year.

Simon Schama (Portfolio, p. 216) teaches history and art history at Columbia University. His most recent book is "Rembrandt's Eyes."

Roz Chast (The Back Page, p. 300), a cartoonist, has illustrated the forthcoming "The Mink Was Already Dead."

Bruce McCall (Easel, p. 252) is a writer and artist. He is working on illustrations and text for a book about dream cars.

David Denby (The Current Cinema, p. 294) is a film critic for the magazine and the author of "Great Books."

Nancy Franklin (On Television, p. 290), who has been on the staff of *The New Yorker* since 1978, is a theatre and television critic for the magazine.

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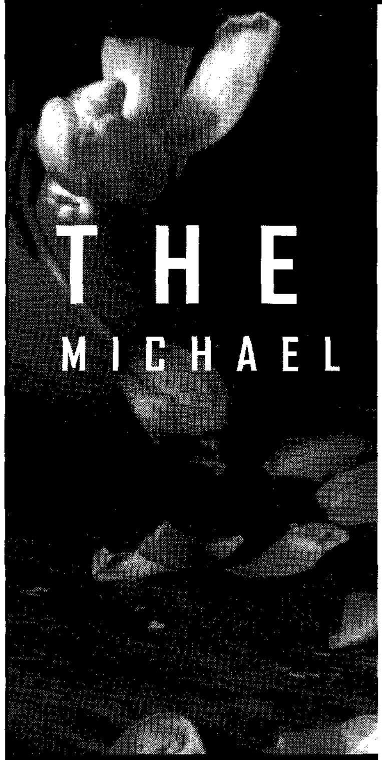

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CONTRIBUTORS

Mark Singer (Takes, p. 277) has been a staff writer since 1974. His books include "Mr. Personality," a collection of *New Yorker* articles.

John McPhee (Takes, p. 251) first contributed to *The New Yorker* in 1963. His book "Annals of the Former World" won a Pulitzer Prize last year.

Pauline Kael (Takes, p. 257) was *The New Yorker's* film critic from 1967 to 1991. She is the author of more than a dozen books on the movies.

Philip Hamburger (Takes, p. 247) has been at the magazine since 1939. A book of his *New Yorker* articles, "Friends Talking in the Night," came out last year.

Janet Flanner (Takes, p. 229) wrote Letter from Paris for fifty years, using the pen name Genêt, and also contributed numerous Profiles and Reporter at Large articles under her own name.

John Cheever (Takes, p. 237) sold his first story to *The New Yorker* in 1935 and was a regular contributor of fiction to the magazine until his death, in 1982.

James Baldwin (Takes, p. 211) wrote more than twenty books. The essay excerpted here was later published as "The Fire Next Time."

M.F.K. Fisher (Takes, p. 141) contributed to the magazine for twenty years. An anthology of her work, "The Measure of Her Powers," has just come out.

E. B. White (Takes, p. 97) was *The New Yorker's* first great stylist and the originator of Notes and Comment, and also contributed countless casuals and pieces of light verse. He used the pseudonym Lee Strout White to sign "Farewell, My Lovely!" because the idea had been suggested to him by Richard L. Strout.

Vladimir Nabokov (Takes, p. 205) first contributed to the magazine in 1942. A new edition of "Speak, Memory" was published last year. ♦

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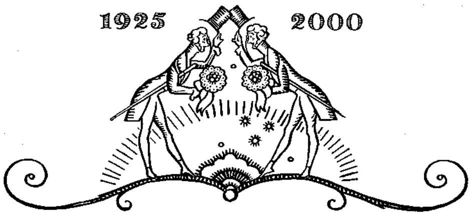
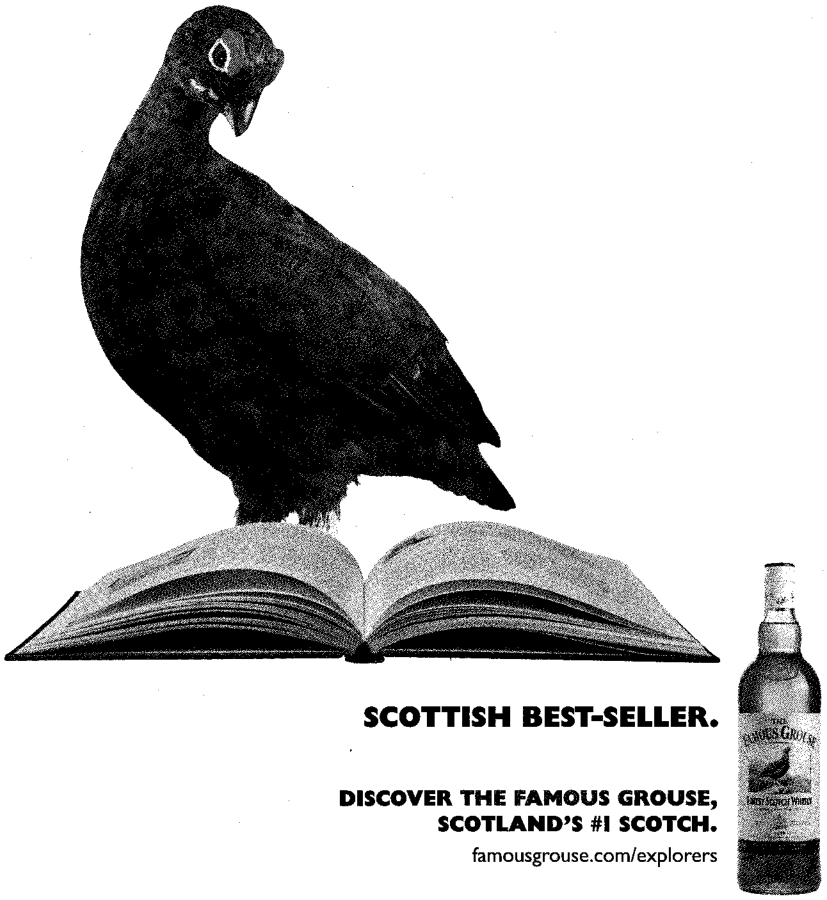


Seventy-five years ago, under the midwifery of Harold Ross, *The New Yorker* came into being. Three-quarters of a century is not bad, although, by the latest standards of life expectancy, it counts as no more than a promising start. Our grandchildren, their genes tailored like suits, will reach a hundred and fifty with ease; for them, seventy-five will be the peak and the prime—a midlife without the crisis. Even now, looking around, you wonder whether notable citizens have been receiving eternal youth through the mail and not letting on. Paul Newman turned seventy-five last month, and he still behaves like the new kid at the pool hall. *The New Yorker* has done well to keep pace with Mr. Newman, but, to be honest, until we start running an Indy-car team and selling our own spaghetti sauce, we should go easy on the hoopla.

There is, nevertheless, much to commemorate. The magazine has had five editors, four homes, one guy with a monocle, and such a plethora of cat cartoons that sensitive readers have been known to complain of hairballs. There has also been a steady flow of books relating to the magazine and to the lives of its begetters. When someone hands you a tradition, the crucial thing is not to ape it, still less to seize up with awe, but to ask yourself what, by way of homage, you can possibly bring to the party. A brisk flip through any history of *The New Yorker* will confirm one's suspicion that the leading lights of Forty-fifth Street burned so hard, and took their pleasures at such a tilt, that the worst favor we could do them now would be to agonize over their legacy. In the depths of Prohibition, Ross started up an office speakeasy in a nearby basement; one day, his managing editor, Ralph Ingersoll, walked in and found his star cartoonist, Peter Arno, and the "Tables for Two" columnist, Lois Long, lying naked together on a sofa. "Arno and I may have been married to one another by then; I can't remember," Long later said. "Maybe we began drinking and forgot that we were married and had an apartment to go to." Let us not forget the sacrifices these people made.

Before Ross launched his new publication, he sat with friends and mulled over possible titles. One of these—according to Jane Grant, his wife at the time—was *Truth.* Had that choice prevailed, the magazine would not be alive today. No printed product should be saddled with so terrible a burden of veracity. As it happens, *The New Yorker* has made matters of fact its business; sticklers for exactitude will agree that, when an employee is packed off to a movie theatre, bearing a copy of the week's film review, in order to check that the second shirt from the left in the casino scene is woven from purple plaid and not magenta velour, there is not much to stickle about. Yet the principle stands: it's not just the truth, it's the way that you tell it—the way that you hint at other, competing truths that are tucked away. This holds good even for those jagged areas of life where the room for maneuver seems minimal: murder, poverty, political infighting, or the threat of a mysterious disease that has already crossed from the Ivory Coast to the Upper West Side, and that you had never heard of before last Thursday. *The New Yorker*, in short, is at its best when conditions grow most chaotic; if you want the brute data of war, but you want them treated with nerveless aplomb, read A. J. Liebling's dispatches from North Africa. When the *Infantry Journal* commends you for accuracy, as it did *The New Yorker* in 1944, you know you're on the right track.

It is in seasons of peace, of course,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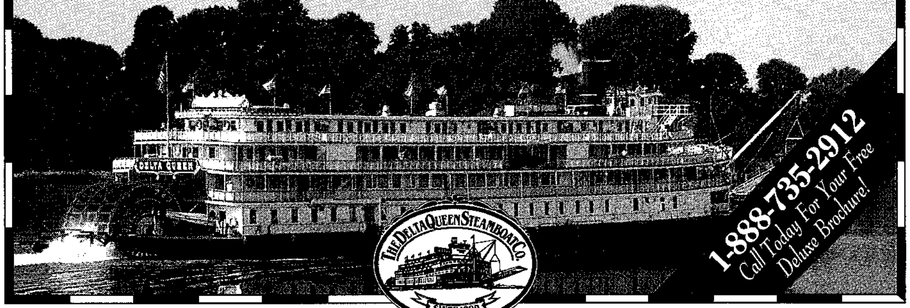

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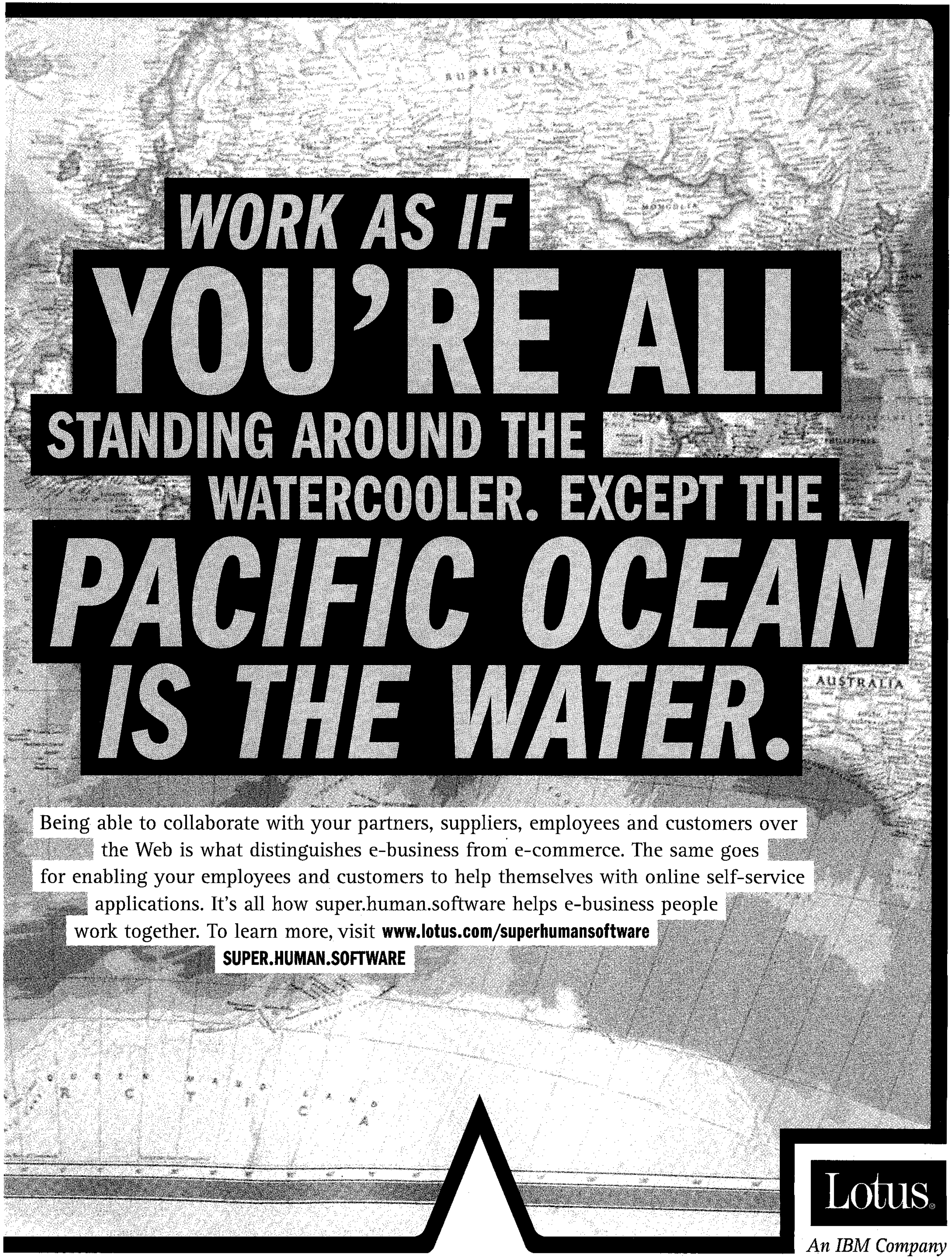
that perplexity comes into full bloom. The time to catch an infantryman is when he puts down his rifle and picks up a guitar, or a skillet, or a librarian in pearls—when the need for prowess and the prospect of failure bring him nearer to our common comedy. The *New Yorker* tone is really a *New Yorker* chord, combining respect for human enterprise, and for the particulars of the case, with a deep delight in human bewilderment. Once your ear is attuned to it, you hear it everywhere: in a biographical sketch that James Thurber wrote of himself—"Two overcoats which he left in the *New Yorker* office last spring were stolen, or else he left them someplace else"—and again, decades later, in "The Talk of the Town," when Donald Barthelme explained how to cook dinner for sixty: "About twenty pounds of sliced onions would be a good addition, although they probably should have gone in earlier."

It is safe to say that no other magazine would have printed that. If the editors at *Gourmet* forgot an ingredient, they would be set upon by aproned subscribers and beaten into stiff peaks with whisks. The craving for crisp, instructive facts should not obscure the fuzzy, peccable realities that lie beyond the reach of the exposé and the problem page. A professor once sent E. B. White a questionnaire, which included the query "Does your periodical endeavor to render public service or to wage crusades?" White went to work. "We are on the side of snow, and against its removal," he replied. "We succeeded in getting the information booth at the Pennsylvania terminal moved out into the middle of the floor, and then discovered there was no information we needed." Americans, amid their genuine worries and their heavy civic tasks, have a duty to be irresponsible; if *The New Yorker* has ever inspired a group of upstanding citizens to sit down and finish their drinks, then a public service has been rendered. Such is the crusade we wage: we seek the truth, the whole truth, and any unsuitable friends with goatees who are riding in the back of truth's car. *The New Yorker* did not invent a world of its own; it stared and squinted at the existing one from unfamiliar angles. Seventy-five years on, the view is just as fine.

—*Anthony Lane*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THE MAIL

INTO THE LOOKING GLASS

Like David Hockney, I am a painter, not an art historian, but I think he is wrong in his theory that Ingres and other Old Masters used optical devices to produce their work ("The Looking Glass," by Lawrence Weschler, January 31st). As I write, a drawing of Pope Innocent X by Velázquez and a copy by a nineteenth-century Spanish master are exhibited together in Madrid. Assuming that both men, or even only the latter, used a lens and that they shared the goal of verisimilitude, why would the two drawings not be identical? Yet they demonstrably are not.

Which raises the question of why any artist draws from another's work. Clearly, hundreds of years of master-apprentice relations prove that one artist copies another in order to build "eye-mind-hand" tools. Hockney does a grave disservice to draftsmanship by failing to note that "lens" is a metaphor for the eye, not a replacement for it. Drawing is a pulling forth of ideas, not a replication of images. And ideas are cheap, powerful, and portable—unlike devices.

Timothy Stotz
Madrid, Spain

As a photographer who considers David Hockney's ideas about the medium both insightful and infuriating, I found reading Lawrence Weschler's account of Hockney's investigations into the use of lenticular aids by Old Masters a curious pleasure. How ironic that Hockney—once the provocative practitioner of multiple-viewpoint photography—should now be raising a ruckus by pointing out the telltale traces of monocular cameras in Ingres, Caravaggio, and others. While art schools might not emphasize such ideas to their drawing students, the widespread use of these devices figures prominently in the opening chapters of every history of photography on my shelf.

The selective myopia of the art-history academy finds a telling parallel in a minor error in the text. Hockney cites an Andy Warhol still-life known to have been drawn from a slide projection as the key to his discovery. The drawing's main elements are identified as "a bowl, a can opener, and a handheld mixer." But the object on the left is not a kitchen appliance; it is a Polaroid portrait camera. Its unusual shape is due to the long-focus lens needed to make undistorted portraits, precisely the telescopic effect Hockney finds compelling in Caravaggio. You don't have to be Oliver Sacks to understand how one could mistake Warhol's camera for a can opener. Such a mistake certainly validates taking a new look at the assumptions we've made about the Old Masters, too.

Bruce C. Kinch
Brookline, Mass.

BUSH ON THE BUS

In his "Like a King," about having a child in Paris (January 31st), Adam Gopnik observes that "those moments when you are confronted with something that is meant both as a joke and seriously" bring out real cultural divides. What an apt preface to Nicholas Lemann's Profile of George W. Bush ("The Redemption," January 31st). The "points" that Lemann took Bush to be scoring at his expense are not taunts per se—they are the half-joking, half-sincere lingua franca of a Southern frat boy. The laughter from the back of Bush's bus, which seemed to torment Lemann like a Greek chorus, was simply the expected response to riffs like Bush's. Political interview? Wrong bus—this is a fraternity rush. A ridiculous amount of political history might depend on how America weighs Bush—smug smart-ass or ribbing chum? On the bus, they know both are true, which is why they trust him.

T. H. Arnold
Cambridge, Mass.

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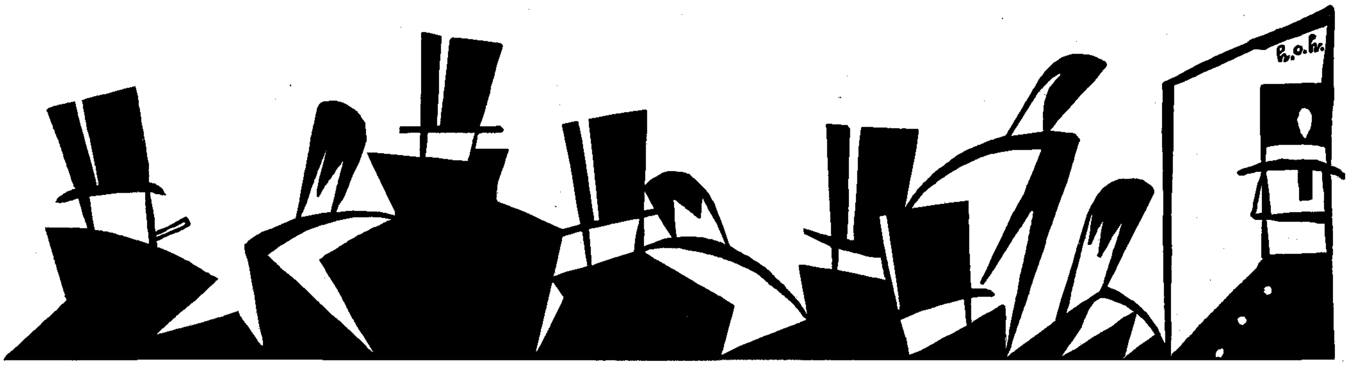
GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



THE THEATRE
OPENINGS & PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

THE ALCHEMIST
Dan Castellaneta (the voice of Homer Simpson) leads the cast in the Classic Stage Company's staging of Ben Jonson's 1610 comedy. Preview on Feb. 16. Opens Feb. 17 at 7. (136 E. 13th St. 677-4210, ext. 2.)

THE ALTRUISTS
A new comedy from Nicky Silver, starring Veanne Cox and Sam Robards. Previews begin Feb. 17. (Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 353-0303.)

AN EMPTY PLATE AT THE CAFÉ DU GRAND BOEUF
John Rando is the director of this comedy by Michael Hollinger, in which a restaurateur goes on a hunger strike. Previews begin Feb. 23. (Primary Stages, 354 W. 45th St. 333-4052.)

ENOUGH ABOUT ME: AN UNAUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY OF VARLA JEAN MERMAN
The alleged love child of Ernest Borgnine and Ethel Merman shares songs and stories from her painful life. Opens Feb. 18 at 10:30. (Chelsea Playhouse, 125 W. 22nd St. 307-4100.)

LETTERS FROM CUBA
The Signature Theatre Company's final production in its Maria Irene Fornes season. In previews through Feb. 19. Opens Feb. 20 at 7. (555 W. 42nd St. 244-7529.)

LOVE IN A THIRSTY LAND
A Polish Jewish immigrant is accused of murder in 1875, in a drama by Alan Glass. Staged by the Jewish Repertory Theatre. Previews Feb. 19-26. Opens Feb. 27 at 7. (Playhouse 91, at 316 E. 91st St. 831-2000.)

THE MOMENT WHEN
A new play by James Lapine, starring Illeana Douglas, Estelle Parsons, and Mark Ruffalo. Previews begin Feb. 18. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

SPLENDORA
A man returns to his Texas home town disguised as a woman, in a musical by Peter Webb, Stephen Hoffman, and Mark Campbell. In previews. (Chelsea Playhouse, 125 W. 22nd St. 307-4100.)

SQUONK
The multimedia performance piece has moved to Broadway. In previews. (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

TAKING A CHANCE ON LOVE
A musical revue about the life and work of the late, overlooked lyricist John Latouche, staged by the York Theatre Company. In previews. (Theatre at St. Peter's Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. 239-6200.)

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29				

THE TALE OF THE ALLERGIST'S WIFE
Charles Busch's new comedy, about an antidote to midlife malaise. In previews through Feb. 27. Opens Feb. 29 at 7:30. (Manhattan Theatre Club, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

THE TIME OF THE CUCKOO
A revival of the 1952 Arthur Laurents drama, starring Debra Monk. In previews. (Mitzi E. Newhouse, Lincoln Center, 239-6200.)

THE TORCH-BEARERS
The Drama Dept. presents George Kelly's 1922 satire of community theatre. In previews through Feb. 22. Opens Feb. 23 at 8. (Greenwich House, 27 Barrow St. 541-8441.)

TRUE WEST
Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly star in Sam Shepard's 1980 play, under the direction of Matthew Warchus. Previews begin Feb. 17. (Circle in the Square, 50th St. west of Broadway. 239-6200.)

THE WILD PARTY
A musical by Andrew Lippa, based on the 1928 poem by Joseph Moncure March. Gabriel Barre is the director. In previews through Feb. 23. Opens Feb. 24 at 6:45. (Manhattan Theatre Club, at City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

OPENED RECENTLY

AMADEUS
From London, a revival of Peter Shaffer's drama, starring Michael Sheen as Mozart and David Suchet as Salieri. Sir Peter Hall is the director. (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

ARMS AND THE MAN
A Roundabout Theatre production of Shaw's 1894 play, under the direction of Roger Rees. (Gramercy, 127 E. 23rd St. 777-4900.)

BAD BOY NIETZSCHE
Richard Foreman's forty-seventh play. (St. Mark's In-the-Bouwerie, Second Ave. at 10th St. 533-4650.)

THE BOMB-ITTY OF ERRORS
In this exuberant take on "The Comedy of Errors," the action has been shifted to a hip-hop realm, but the basic ideas remain the same. Like the Shakespeare original, "Bomb-Itty" is witty, lewd, allusive, and chaotic, and it plays fast and loose with stereotypes, but the four extravagantly talented writer-actors (who play all of the parts) make it seem altogether new. Their enthusiasm for the material is infectious. (45 Bleecker, 45 Bleecker St., at Lafayette St. 307-4100.)

DAME EDNA: THE ROYAL TOUR
Former housewife turned international entertainer Dame Edna Everage (the sublime comic creation of the Australian Dadaist and dandy Barry Humphries) is, to adopt her penchant for alliteration, a virago of vitriol, a harpy of happiness, a megastar of maliciousness. (Reviewed in our issue of 11/1/99.) (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

DINNER WITH FRIENDS
Donald Margulies's new play is a perceptive depiction of the mystery and the mundanity of marriage, and the cast give well-rounded performances. (Variety Arts, 110 Third Ave., at 14th St. 239-6200.)

THE DIRECTOR
John Shea stars as a once well-known director turned janitor who gets involved with a young and credulous theatre troupe, in a suspense drama by Nancy Hasty. (Arclight, 152 W. 71st St. 279-4200.)

FUDDY MEERS
The very promising playwright David Lindsay-Abaire's kitchen-sink comedy, starring J. Smith-Cameron. (Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane, east of Sixth Ave., between W. 3rd and Bleecker Sts. 307-4100.)

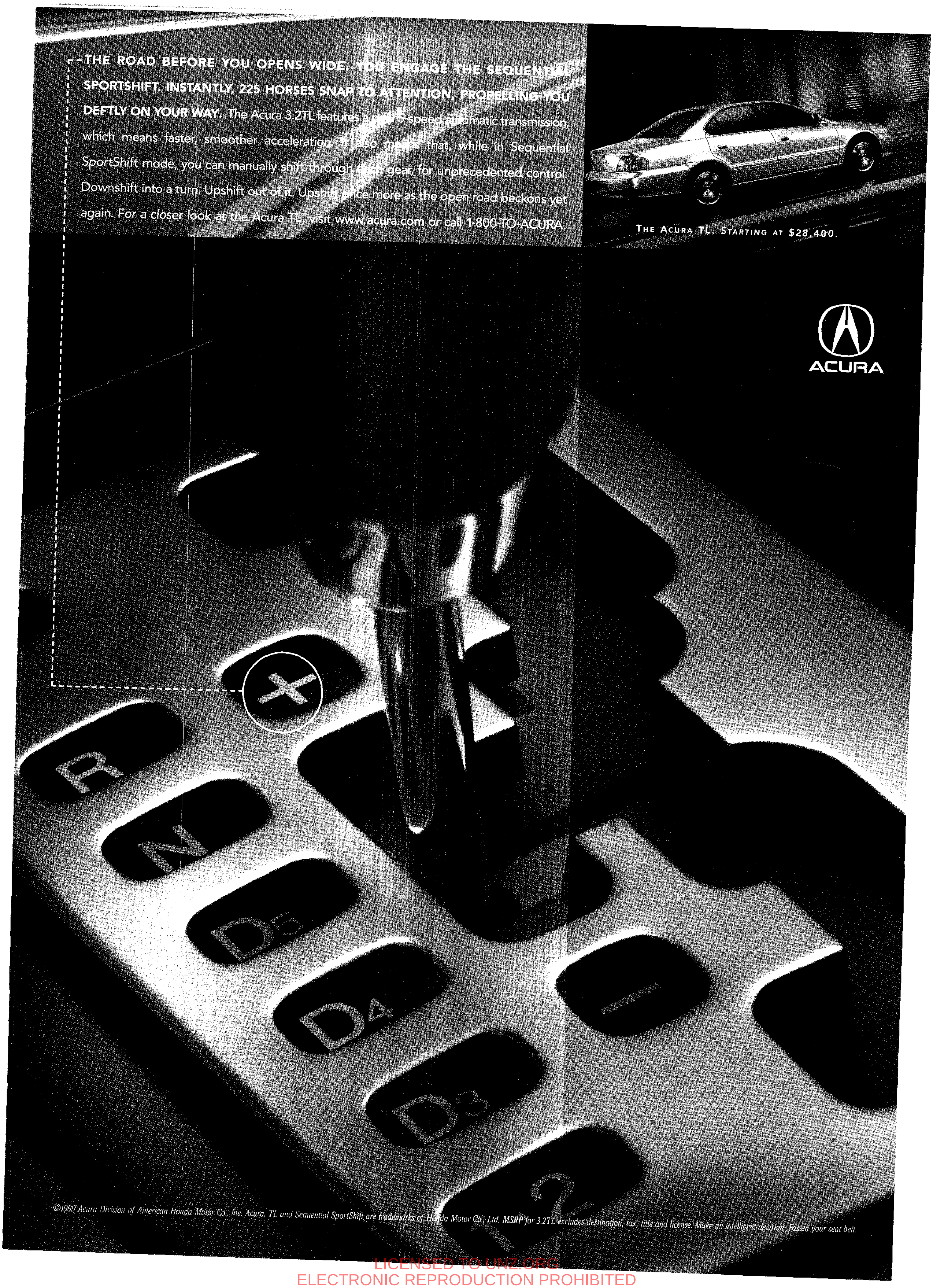
FULLY COMMITTED
In this hilarious one-man comedy, Mark Setlock plays a lovable reservations clerk at an unnamed tony Manhattan restaurant, who deals with the daily deluge of calls from dying-to-be-guests. (Cherry Lane Theatre, 38 Commerce St. 239-6200.)

HUNDREDS OF SISTERS & ONE BIG BROTHER
Deborah Swisher's autobiographical one-woman play, which looks back on her childhood experiences in a California commune. (Harold Clurman, 412 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

JACKIE MASON: MUCH ADO ABOUT EVERYTHING
The comic is back on Broadway with a new show. (Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

JAMES JOYCE'S THE DEAD
Playwrights Horizons' musical version of the short story has moved to Broadway's Belasco Theatre for a limited-run encore engagement. (11/8/99) (111 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

KING JOHN
This is one of the justly neglected Shakespeare plays—too much history shoehorned into too many speeches—but the fictional Sir Robert Plantagenet, who carries the plot and saves the



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day, is a sharp needle poked at the balloons of rationalization and hypocrisy. As played by the energetic Derek Smith, he's also a delight. As with her 1995 staging of "Henry VI," the director Karin Coonrod has created a splashy yet lucid evening, in which language matters as much as spectacle and both combine to create a fine production of an unwieldy script. Of the rest of the cast, Myra Carter, as Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Michael Rogers, as a put-upon burgher, stand out in a very strong field. (American Place, 111 W. 46th St. 239-6200. Closes Feb. 20.)

KISS ME, KATE
This revival of the Cole Porter musical represents the highest level of theatrical collaboration currently on Broadway. With all its admirable expertise and its various delights, though, the production is oddly earthbound: it comes down to the vexing issue of chemistry. The leads, Marin Mazzie and Brian Stokes Mitchell, are expert players, but they are not—in the true meaning of the words—star performers, the kind who bring something larger than life to musical stories. (11/29/99) (Martin Beck, 302 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

NIGHTHAWKS
From the Willow Cabin Theatre Company, a drama about urban isolation by Lynn Rosen. (Blue Heron, 123 E. 24th St. 886-1889.)

NIGHT VISION: A NEW THIRD TO FIRST WORLD VAMPYRE OPERA
A two-thousand-year-old vampire takes the pop-music world by storm, in an Afro-Asian jazz musical by Fred Ho (music) and Ruth Margraff (book and lyrics). (HERE, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 647-0202. Closes Feb. 19.)

NORTH ATLANTIC
The Wooster Group's multimedia play, set aboard an aircraft carrier during the Cold War. (Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St. 966-3651.)

OTHELLO
The National Asian American Theatre Company's version of Shakespeare's tragedy. (Connelly Theatre, 220 E. 4th St. For information and tickets, call 718-623-1672.)

OUR PLACE IN TIME
Six actors portray more than thirty New York characters, in a collection of interwoven scenes by Clare Coss. (Women's Project and Productions Theatre, 424 W. 55th St. 239-6200.)

THE PRICE
In Arthur Miller's 1968 play, a failed, dutiful brother, who thinks that life has given him a bad deal, cuts another bad deal, this time with a furniture dealer. But when his successful sibling turns up, the play becomes a negotiation about their family history, an agreement that can't be reached. As the rivalry is played out, the audience watches the riveting spectacle of a man clinging to a self-destructive illusion, despite all evidence to the contrary. (Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

PUTTING IT TOGETHER
A revue celebrating the songs of Stephen Sondheim, starring Carol Burnett. Directed by Eric D. Schaeffer. (Ethel Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 239-6200. Closes Feb. 20.)

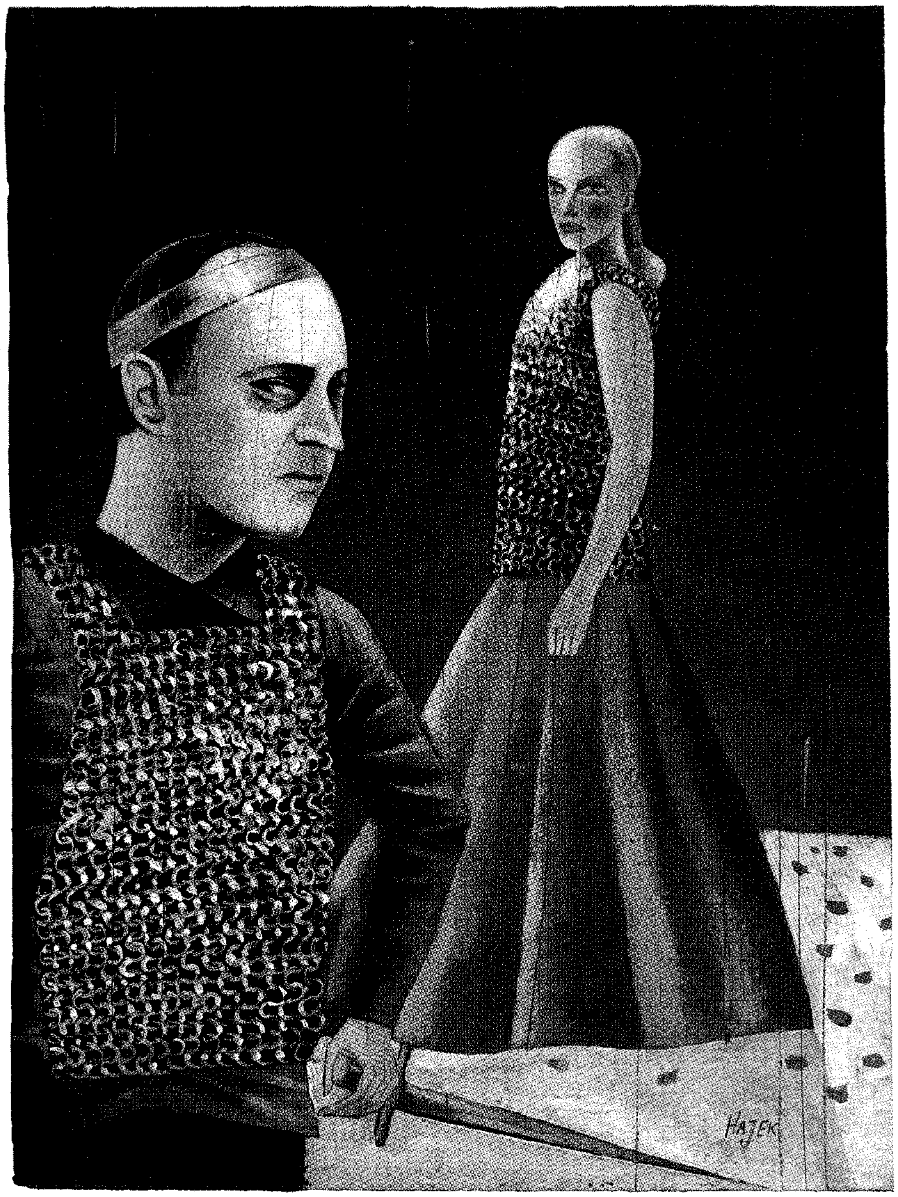
SATURDAY NIGHT
Stephen Sondheim's first musical, about a Flatbush man (David Campbell) who leaves Brooklyn in 1929 to seek his fortune on Wall Street and win a débutante's heart. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 246-4422.)

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER
The musical, based on the 1977 film. (Minskoff, 45th St. west of Broadway. 307-4100.)

SWING!
A musical salute to the genre, directed and choreographed by Lynne Taylor-Corbett. (St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

TWO SISTERS AND A PIANO
Nilo Cruz's drama, set in Cuba in 1991, traces the fate of two women who speak out against Castro. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 239-6200.)

THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES
Eve Ensler's one-woman show, based on interviews she conducted with two hundred women about their vaginas, is now being performed by a rotating three-woman cast. There's a certain amount of shtick involved, but most of the stories are touching and memorable. (Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200.)



Shakespeare's "King John," in a Theatre for a New Audience staging.

OLAF HAJEK

WAITING IN THE WINGS
In the best of Noël Coward's postwar plays, old gallant theatricals duke it out in a retirement home, where they fire off some terrific one-liners. Although the play itself is somewhat creaky, the pros who bring it to life here aren't: Bette Henritze, Elizabeth Wilson, Rosemary Harris, Dana Ivey, and the evergreen Lauren Bacall. (The show reopens Feb. 17 at the Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 239-6200.)

LONG RUNS

ANNIE GET YOUR GUN
Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 307-4100.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
Lunt-Fontanne, 205 W. 46th St. 307-4747.

BLUE MAN GROUP/TUBES
Astor Place Theatre, 434 Lafayette St. 254-4370.

CABARET
Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 239-6200.

CATS
Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 239-6200.

CHICAGO
Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

DE LA GUARDA
Daryl Roth, 20 Union Sq. E.,
at 15th St. 239-6200.

THE FANTASTICKS
Sullivan Street Playhouse, 181 Sullivan St.,
at Bleecker St. 674-3838.

FOOTLOOSE
Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 307-4100.

FORBIDDEN BROADWAY
Stardust, Broadway at 51st St. 239-6200.

FOSSE
Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH
Jane Street Theatre, Hotel Riverview
Ballroom, 113 Jane St. 239-6200.

I LOVE YOU, YOU'RE PERFECT, NOW CHANGE
Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200.

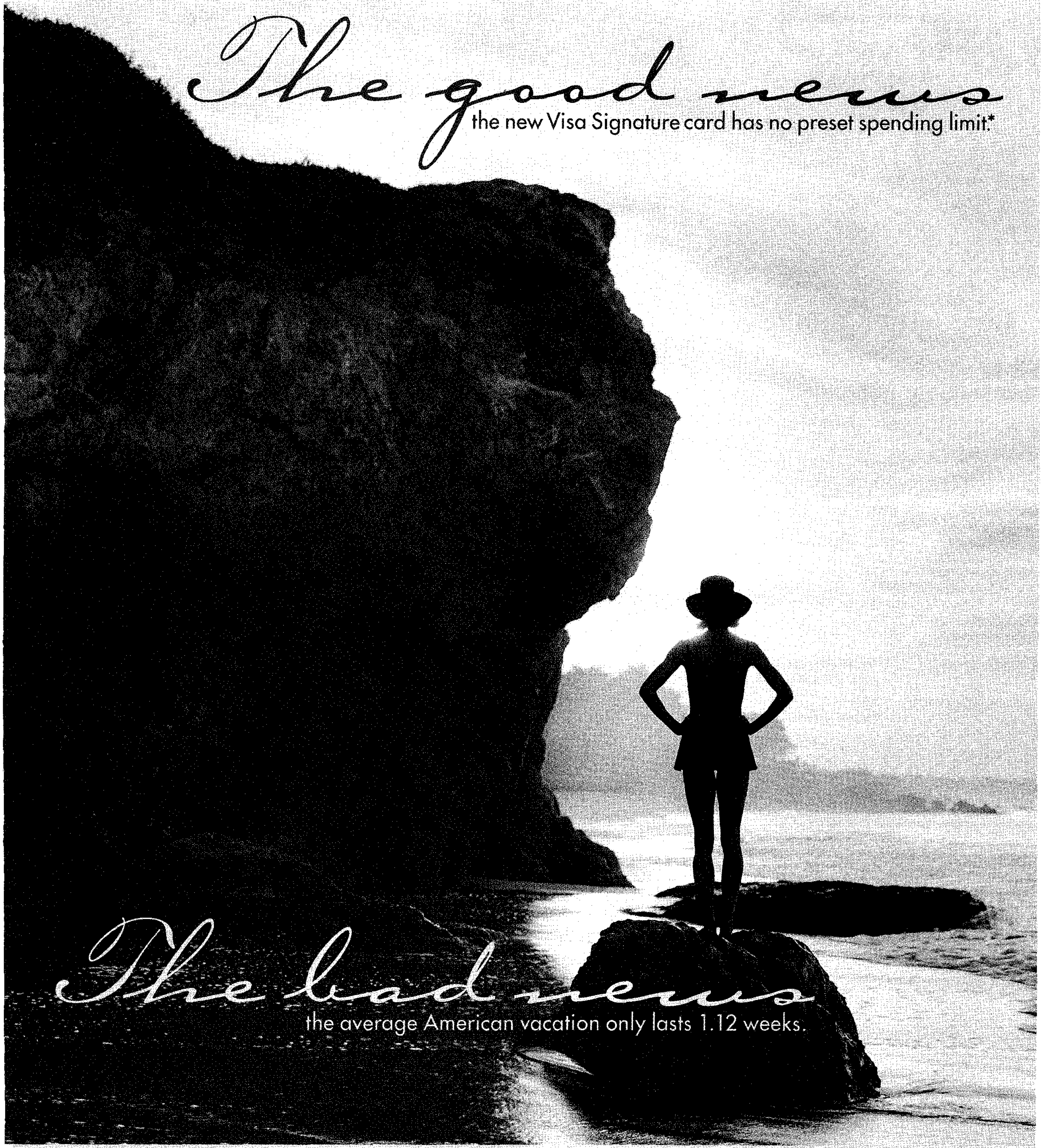
JEKYLL & HYDE
Plymouth, 236 W. 45th St. 239-6200.

LATE-NITE CATECHISM
St. Luke's Church, 308 W. 46th St.
239-6200.

THE LION KING
New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 307-4100.

LES MISÉRABLES
Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 239-6200.

MISS SAIGON
Broadway Theatre, Broadway
at 53rd St. 239-6200.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OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS
John Houseman, 450 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.

PERFECT CRIME
Duffy, 1553 Broadway, at 46th St. 695-3401.

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA
Majestic, 245 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

RENT
Nederlander, 208 W. 41st St. 921-8000.

SECRETS EVERY SMART TRAVELER SHOULD KNOW
Ibis, 327 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

STOMP
Orpheum, 126 Second Ave., at St. Marks Pl. 477-2477.

TONY N' TINA'S WEDDING
St. Luke's Church, 308 W. 46th St. 239-6200.

WIT
Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 307-4100.

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET

Final performances of the season. Feb. 16 at 8: "Irish Fantasy," "Liebeslieder Walzer," and "Stars and Stripes." ♦ Feb. 17 at 8: "Coppélia." ♦ Feb. 18 at 8: "Irish Fantasy," "Scènes de Ballet," and "Liebeslieder Walzer." ♦ Feb. 19 at 2: "Irish Fantasy," "Bugaku," and "I'm Old Fashioned." ♦ Feb. 19 at 8: "Ballo Della Regina," "Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux," "Bugaku," and "Western Symphony." ♦ Feb. 20 at 3: "Ballo Della Regina," "Romeo and Juliet," "Opus 19/The Dreamer," and "Ancient Airs and Dances." ♦ Feb. 22 at 8: "Ancient Airs and Dances," "Bugaku," and "I'm Old Fashioned." ♦ Feb. 23 at 8: "La Valse," "Barber Violin Concerto," and "Stars and Stripes." ♦ Feb. 24 at 8: "Ancient Airs and Dances," "Liebeslieder Walzer," and "Western Symphony." ♦ Feb. 25 at 8: "Scènes de Ballet," "Opus 19/The Dreamer," and "Liebeslieder Walzer." ♦ Feb. 26 at 2: "Ballo Della Regina," "Romeo and Juliet," "Ancient Airs and Dances," and "I'm Old Fashioned." ♦ Feb. 26 at 8: "Bugaku," "Opus 19/The Dreamer," and "La Valse." ♦ Feb. 27 at 3: "I'm Old Fashioned," "Scènes de Ballet," and "Stars and Stripes." (New York State Theatre. 870-5570.)

"BLACK DANCE: TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION"

Four companies—the L.A.-based Bre Dance Theatre, the Union Dance Company of London, M'Zawa Dance from Brooklyn, and the Philadelphia troupe Philadanco—offer works that blend traditional African dance with movements from a variety of contemporary black dance styles. (651 Arts at BAM Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St. 718-636-4100. Feb. 16-19 at 8.)

COMPANHIA DE DANÇA DEBORAH COLKER

The Rio-based company performs "Rota" ("Wheel"), an evening-length work that builds from everyday gesture to circuslike feats of athleticism, and concludes with the fourteen-member company suspended from a Ferris-wheel-like contraption, whirling over the heads of the audience. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 242-0800. Feb. 16-18 at 8, Feb. 19 at 2 and 8, and Feb. 20 at 2 and 7:30.)

THE WASHINGTON BALLET

The troupe offers four works: "Nuages," choreographed by Jiri Kylian; "Na Floresta," by Nacho Duato; "The Eyes That Gently Touch," by Kirk Peterson; and "Juanita y Alicia," by company director Septime Webre. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 242-0800. Feb. 22-25 at 8, Feb. 26 at 2 and 8, and Feb. 27 at 2.)

Ann Carlson, in the penultimate segment of "Grass/Bird/Rodeo," at P.S. 122.

ANDREA ARTZ

MOLISSA FENLEY

The choreographer, who for many years made provocative solo works in collaboration with such artists and composers as Louise Bourgeois, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, and Philip Glass, has in recent outings added duets and group works to her repertoire. For her solos at the Kitchen, she dances among Carol Hepper's translucent sculptures made of fish skin in "Island" and in "Voices" creates a call-and-response piece with cellist Joan Jeanrenaud, in which she answers musical phrases with snatches of choreography. A great roster of dancers have lined up for her group works and duets, including Paz Tanjuaquio, Meg Wolfe, and the former Cunningham dancer Foofwa d'Imobilité (formerly Frederic Gafner). (512 W. 19th St. 255-5793. Feb. 16-19 at 8.)

"GRASS/BIRD/RODEO"

The inclusive and inventive choreographer Ann Carlson, who has performed on dairy farms, frozen ponds, and proscenium stages, and with live animals, birds, strangers, and other unpredictable collaborators, presents a three-part solo work, in which she dresses by turns in a turf suit, the feathered finery of a Vegas showgirl, and the chaps and six-shooters of a rodeo rider. (P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 477-5288. Feb. 17-20 at 8:30.)

CHERYLYN LAVAGNINO

The fifteen-member company in "Chapel Songs," a series of four site-specific works. (Danspace Project, St. Mark's In-the-Bouwerie, Second Ave. at 10th St. 674-8194. Feb. 17-19 at 8:30.)

ALLYSON GREEN DANCE

Three new works, including "Paragraphs on the Wind" and "Four Voices, Inside Out." (Danspace Project. 674-8194. Feb. 24-27 at 8:30.)

"THE SELF-TITLED DÉBUT ALBUM"

Ellen Stokes Shadle DanceWorks, in a series of pop-heavy short works. (Merce Cunningham Studios, 55 Bethune St. 924-0077. Feb. 18 at 9 and Feb. 19-20 at 8.)

"THE ELEGANCE OF TAP/ THE COMEDY OF TAP"

The lithe Broadway clown Bill Irwin hosts a tap showcase. (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. 997-6661. Feb. 25 at 8.)

"ANOTHER TELEPATHIC THING"

Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar's Big Dance Theatre blends elements of Mark Twain's "The Mysterious Stranger" with segments of stolen Hollywood audition tapes in a tale about the angel Satan in L.A. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 924-0077. Feb. 17-19 and Feb. 24-26 at 8 and Feb. 20 and Feb. 27 at 3. Through March 5.)

NIGHT LIFE
CONCERTS

LADYSMITH BLACK MAMBAZO / OLU DARA

The great South African a-cappella group, best known for its work on Paul Simon's "Graceland," presents an evening of the Zulu vocal music known as *isicathamiya*. Dara is the Mississippi-born avant-garde jazz cornettist who's also proven adept at the blues guitar. (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. 840-2824. Feb. 18 at 8.)

"DUETS ON THE HUDSON"

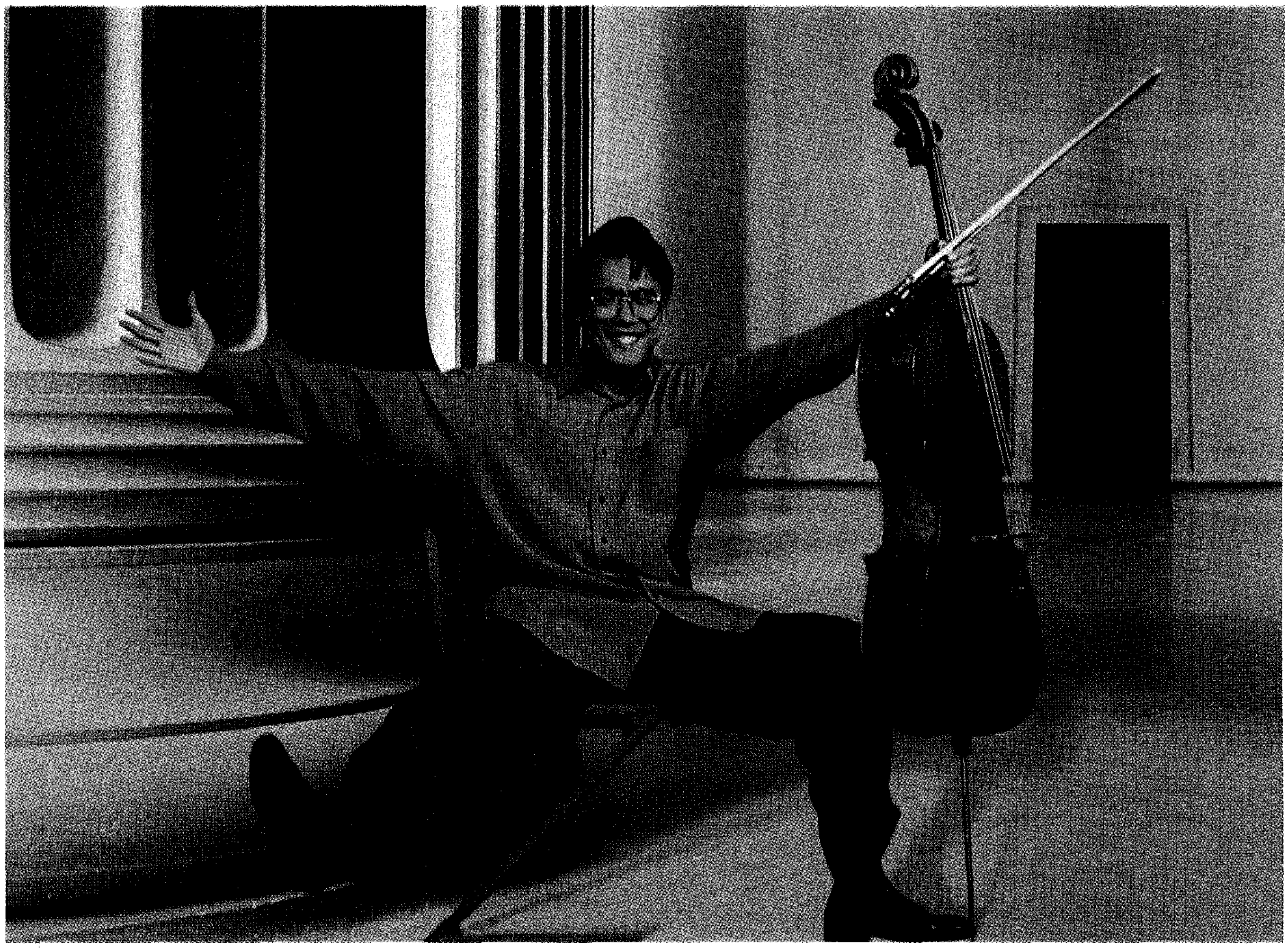
Brotherhood is powerful. Pianist Paul Bley and bassist Charlie Haden, a pair of proto-avant-gardists who've collaborated off and on since the late fifties, and pianist Kenny Barron and saxophonist Gary Bartz, mainstream modernists who've been crossing paths for close to forty years, sing the praises of friendship and musical telepathy on this double bill. (Kaplan Penthouse, Rose Building, Lincoln Center. 721-6500. Feb. 19-20 at 8.)

CHER

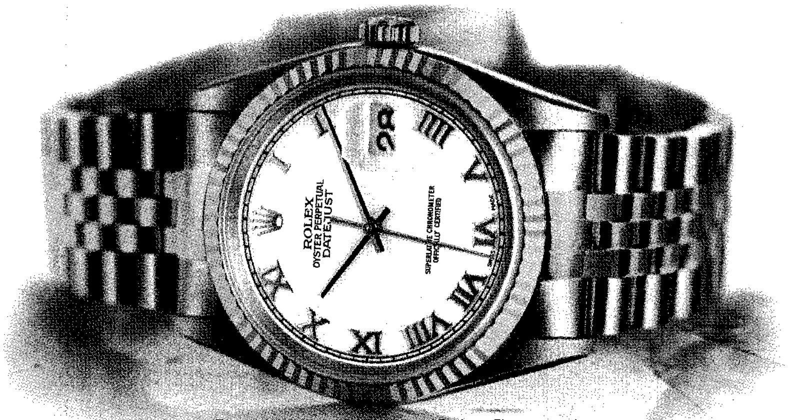
Thanks to the irresistible Euro-disco smash "Believe," the Rasputin of popular culture has roared back to the top. Having lost the public's attention before, Cher is not likely to let minds wander again. Expect innumerable costume changes,

YO-YO MA FAVORS
ITALIAN INSTRUMENTS MADE IN THE
EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

OCCASIONALLY, HOWEVER, HE
MAKES AN EXCEPTION.



Yo-Yo Ma says the 1712 Stradivarius he plays is "like a great Bordeaux," while the 1733 Montagnana is "earthier, like a Burgundy." About a third instrument, his Rolex, he says, "I just love it. You can use it for any occasion."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JERSEY LIGHTNING *For years, the indie-rock group Yo La Tengo—led by married duo Ira Kaplan and Georgia Hubley (right)—has moved between sweet acoustic pop and hurricanes of feedback. The Hoboken band's tenth album, "And Then Nothing Turned Itself Inside-Out," is its most austere record yet; the few moments of exuberance are like flowers blooming in the tundra. Onstage (see Concerts), Kaplan and Hubley have been known to abandon all restraint and leave their instruments in ruins.*

JOHN RITTER

classic hits, and appropriate displays of divatude. With Lou Bega, the porkpie-hatted German import who hit the jackpot reminding America how to mambo. (Continental Airlines Arena, the Meadowlands. 212-307-7171. Feb. 24 at 7:30.)

YUSEF LATEEF
Starting out as a hard-bop tenor saxophonist in the sixties, Lateef began exploring eclectic styles and exotic milieus by adding flute, oboe, and other offbeat instruments into his mix. Today he stands as a forefather of both postmodern jazz and world music. (Alice Tully Hall. 875-5050. Feb. 25 at 8.)

MORRISSEY
The moody Brit, in the midst of a quick tour of the States. (Roseland, 239 W. 52nd St. 307-7171. Feb. 25 at 8. ♦ Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. 496-7070. Feb. 29 at 8.)

"CELTIC FIDDLE FESTIVAL"
Jigs and reels from Ireland's Kevin Burke, Scotland's Johnny Cunningham, and Cape Breton's Christian Lemaître, who will be joined by his compatriot guitarist, Soïg Siberil. (Town Hall. Feb. 26 at 8.)

YO LA TENGO
With Lambchop. (Town Hall. Feb. 29 at 8.)

CLUBS

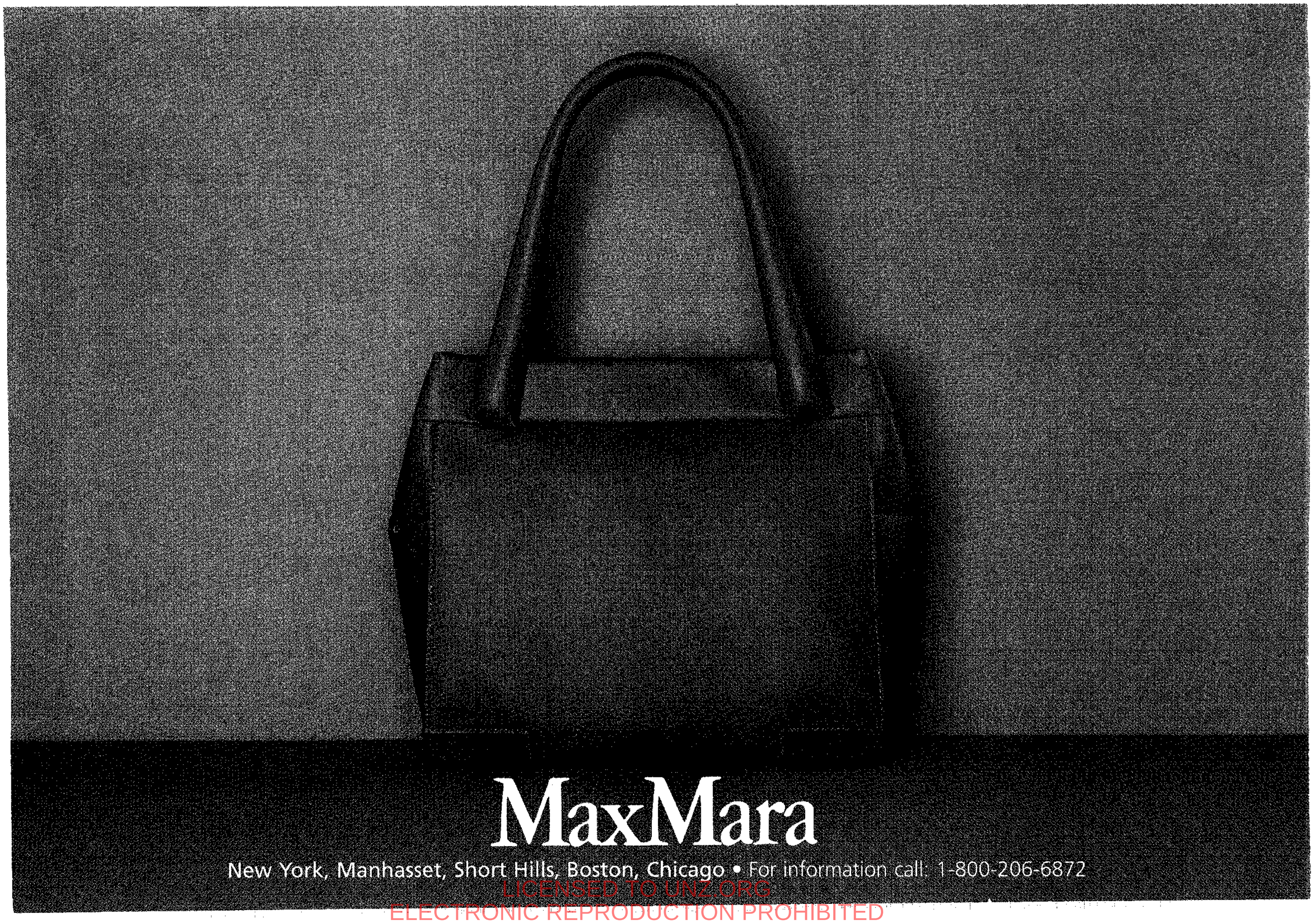
Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

LA BELLE ÉPOQUE
827 Broadway, at 13th St. (254-6436)—Feb. 20: A pre-Mardi Gras party with Louisiana's **Dwight Carrier and Ro Dog.** Wear a costume.

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (533-2111)—Feb. 16: After years of living in suburban Detroit, **Patti Smith** is back at home in New York City, and she's on a roll, releasing three albums in four years. The latest, the assuredly muscular "Gung Ho," is due at the end of March. This show is being taped for the cable-television show "Music Choice," which is a mixed blessing. Fans who can't make it to the concert can watch the broadcast, which is scheduled to coincide with the release of "Gung Ho." Fans who can make it may find that the cameras and recording equipment interfere with the mighty flow of Smith's passions. A national tour is set to support the new album, and it might be better to catch her then.

CHICAGO B.L.U.E.S.
73 Eighth Ave., at 13th St. (924-9755)—Feb. 26: Guitarist **Duke Robillard,** one of the founders of Roomful of Blues and a former member of the Fabulous Thunderbirds.

IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (777-6800)—Feb. 23: Cuban singer **Eliades Ochoa,** a veteran of the Buena Vista Social Club, stops by with his own group, El Cuarteto Patria. Ochoa's new release, "Sublime Illusion," is a fine showcase for his rich voice, but the stage is his best milieu. Feb. 26: **Robert Schimmel.** The incredibly obscene and wildly inventive comedian, whose corrosive material, frequently about his own sexual and emotional embarrassments, makes him one of the funniest standups in the country.



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JOE'S PUB
425 Lafayette St. (539-8777)—Feb. 15-19: **Aimee Mann** and **Michael Penn.** The former 'Til Tuesday singer (whose music helped brighten the film "Magnolia") joins the songwriting brother of Sean Penn, who also happens to be her husband, for a master class in angst-ridden tunes and knotty wordplay. In the age of Britney Spears, this gifted pair could pass for Gilbert and Sullivan.

KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (219-3055)—Feb. 18: **Marc Ribot y los Cubanos Postizos.** Downtown's answer to Ry Cooder's Buena Vista Social Club, Ribot's "prosthetic" Cubans appropriate the arrangements of Arsenio Rodriguez and other pre-Castro bandleaders. Feb. 26: The great funk keyboardist **Bernie Worrell,** a charter member of Parliament-Funkadelic and, later, a member of the enlarged Talking Heads, leads his own hip-swaying ensemble. Feb. 29: **Barbez,** a multilingual Brooklyn quintet that produces woozy café rock. Elements of klezmer, French *musette,* punk, and tango are bound together by moody, smart lyrics and a mesmerizing accordion redolent of dripping candles.

MAXWELL'S
1039 Washington St., Hoboken (201-798-0406)—Feb. 17: Cleveland's hard-rocking **Cobra Verde.** Feb. 27: **Lambchop.**

MERCURY LOUNGE
217 E. Houston St. (260-4700)—Feb. 18: Singer-songwriter **Peter Salett,** whose talent for engaging narratives is complemented nicely by a rich voice and thick sideburns. Feb. 24: The **Wild Colonials,** once the *salonistes* of the L.A. music scene (Rickie Lee Jones appeared on the band's 1996 CD, "This Can't Be Life"), have since been bounced from the majors. Fortunately, the band soldiers on, driven by Angela McCluskey's heartfelt honey-and-hot-sauce vocals. Feb. 25: A family of musicians, the **Nields** make clever songs full of sweet harmonizing which strive to make the leap from folk to rock.

S.O.B.'S
204 Varick St., at W. Houston St. (243-4940)—Feb. 26: **Buckwheat Zydeco.** Stanley (Buckwheat) Dural, Jr., a leading ambassador of zydeco music, is a true party professional. Vocal-cord trouble from decades of touring sidelined Dural briefly last year, but the seasoned entertainer is back on his feet and ready to make even the most uptight New York crowd dance. Keep your eye on the washboard player. Dining.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (840-6800)—**Julie Wilson,** the doyenne of New York's chanteuses, is in the midst of a four-week run dedicated to the songs of Dixieland, backed by the banjo, tuba, trombone, and reed section of the Smith Street Society Jazz Band. Dining.

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (581-3080)—Feb. 17-19: Conga giant **Ray Barretto** and guitarist **Kenny Burrell** have shared the grooves of classic albums since the late fifties. The elegant Burrell made a good showing on Barretto's recent "Portraits in Jazz and Clave," and extends the reunion by joining him at this engagement. Dining.

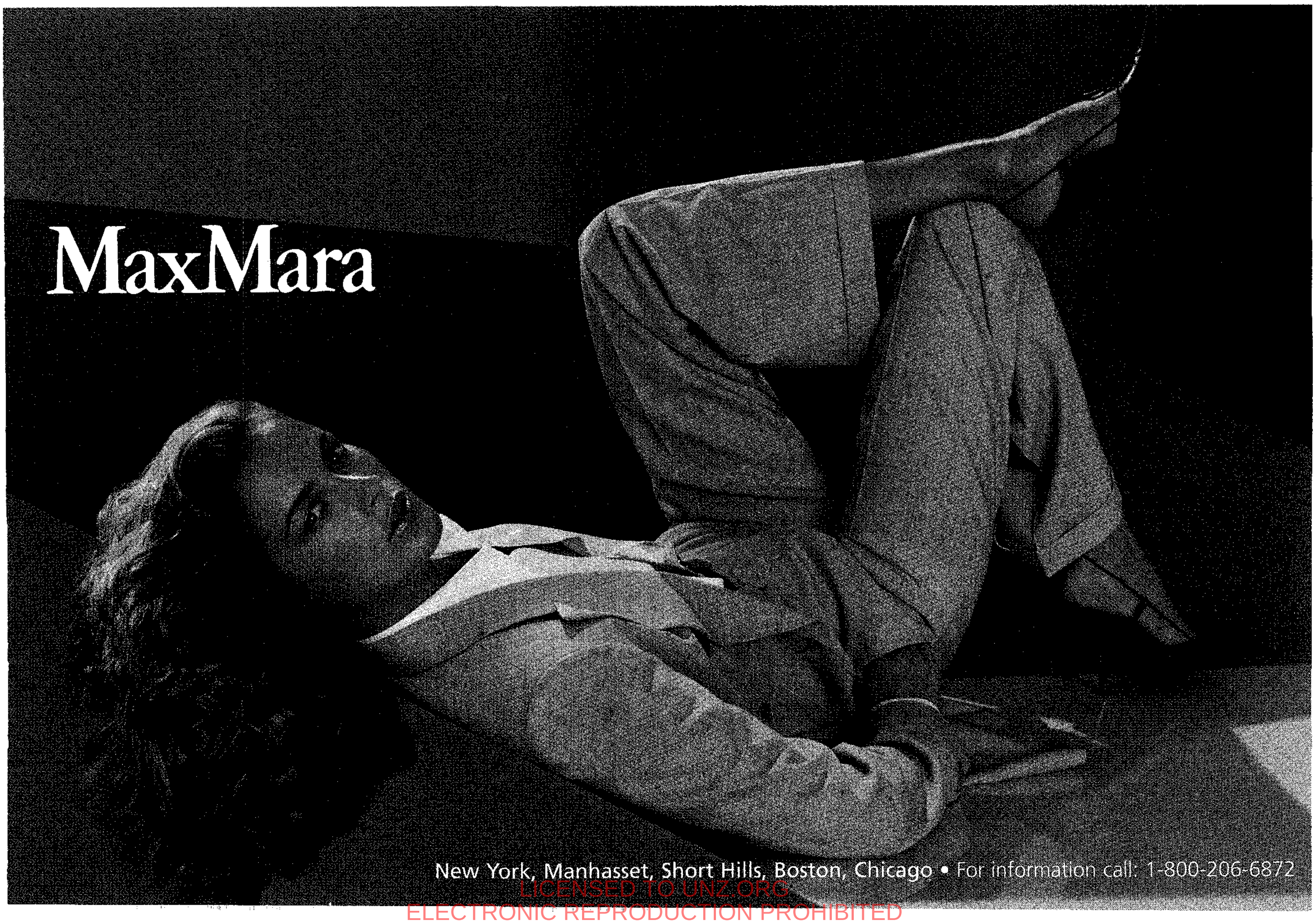
BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (475-8592)—After having spent a lifetime immersed in American vernacular song, from rhythm and blues to Broadway standards and gospel, **Ruth Brown** (here through Feb. 20) is a walking compendium of twentieth-century vocal traditions. She wraps it all up and delivers the whole soulful bundle with the pride of an artist and the grit of a show-business survivor.

IRIDIUM
48 W. 63rd St. (582-2121)—Through Feb. 20: **Groove Masters 2000.** Four jazzmen getting down just for the funk of it. And if any quartet of lusty veterans deserves to have some fun it's saxophonist **David (Fathead) Newman,** organist **Jack McDuff,** trombonist **Al Grey** and drummer **Bobby Durham.** Feb. 22-27: The **Nicholas Payton** quintet. Although Payton, the extravagantly gifted trumpeter, stays in fairly generic territory as a bandleader and composer, his recent recordings indicate that he's capable of inventive dissention. The harpsichords and Earth, Wind, and Fire covers on his new "Nick @ Night," however, may not be the most thoughtful way out of his stylistic roadblock. Mondays belong to electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.**

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (576-2232)—Feb. 16-19: The **Lewis Nash** septet. Nash can lift a band clear off the stage with drum work that is the very essence of clean, modern swing. He's what all young bop drummers should aspire to be. Feb. 23-24: The **Peter Leitch** sextet. The fleet Canadian guitarist Leitch has called New York home long enough to hone his already prodigious chops and to establish fruitful working relationships with excellent players like bassist **Dwayne Burno.** Dining.

KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (219-3055)—Feb. 28: The **Transparent Quartet** could seem a little arch to the uninitiated. But those who've followed his career since the Microscopic Septet days know that Transparent Quartet leader **Philip Johnston** rarely does anything less than pointedly musical, not to mention terribly clever. Evoking West Coast jazz as easily as they reinvent the conventions of silent-film music, this offbeat drummerless combo—juggling saxophones, vibraphone, piano, and bass—pumps iron-rich blood into contemporary chamber jazz.

UP OVER JAZZ CAFE
351 Flatbush Ave., at Seventh Ave., Brooklyn (718-398-5413)—Feb. 18-19: The **Russell Malone** quartet. Why does guitarist Malone make other fretmen fret? Ample technique aside, it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could be his sweeping grasp of jazz styles, which has allowed him to blend as easily with such swing and neo-swing masters as Bucky Pizzarelli and Diana Krall as he does with fervent boppers like Roy Hargrove.

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (255-4037)—Through Feb. 20: The **Roy Hargrove** quintet. Trumpeter Hargrove is feisty, historically aware, and blessed with a brassy, ringing tone, but his defining quality may be his sheer enthusiasm. Feb. 22-27: The **Mark Turner** quartet. Reconciling the influences of polar-opposite tenor saxophonists John Coltrane and Warne Marsh is but one of Turner's more impressive accomplishments. He's the most mature and aesthetically satisfying tenorist of the current rash of youngish players. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (879-5500)—**"Walker Evans,"** a comprehensive retrospective, the photographer's first. Its sequence of understated black-and-white photographs of vernacular subjects, from roadside billboards to New York City subway passengers, traces the development of the artist from college dropout to forefather of the documentary genre. Evans is best known for his collaboration with James Agee, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"; the pictures of Depression-era sharecroppers are a high point of the show. The stoic expression on the woman in "Alabama Tenant Farmer's Wife," equal parts dignity and sorrow, has an emotional impact undiluted by the familiarity of the image. By comparison, the color Polaroids from the early seventies, which wind things up, seem like little more than a well-deserved folly. Through May 14. ♦ **"The World of Scholar's Rocks."** Centuries before the pet-rock craze, Chinese artists were collecting small pieces of strangely eroded stone which mimic the craggy peaks and grottoes of mountains. While the paintings they inspired are often exquisite (a hundred are on view here), it's the rocks themselves that captivate. Some are more evocative than others—the black limestone "Rock in the Form of a Seated Tiger" could easily be named "Giant Wad of Chewing Gum"—but the intricacy of some of the tinier rocks makes it hard to believe they were wrought by nature. Through Aug. 20. ♦ **"Tilman Riemenschneider: Master Sculptor of the Late Middle Ages."** Through May 14. ♦ **"Only the Best: Masterpieces of the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon."** Through Feb. 27. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—**"Places"** and **"Things,"** two parts of the tripartite **"Modern Starts"** exhibition, offering works drawn from MOMA's permanent collection, all focussed on the years 1880-1920, continue through March 14. (Open Saturdays through Tuesdays, and Thursdays, 10:30 to 5:45; Fridays, 10:30 to 8:15.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (423-3500)—**"The Worlds of Nam June Paik,"** a retrospective devoted to the works of the Korean-born artist, features video installations, TV sculptures, and two site-specific laser projections, "Jacob's Ladder," which presents a waterfall of light tumbling down the rotunda, and "Sweet and Sublime," which projects changing geometric shapes onto the rotunda floor. Through April 26. (Open Sundays through Wednesdays, 9 to 6; Fridays and Saturdays, 9 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (570-3676)—The museum closes **"The American Century"** show, at the rate of a floor per week, through Feb. 26. (Open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays through Sundays, 11 to 6; Thursdays, 1 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM AT PHILIP MORRIS
120 Park Ave., at 42nd St. (878-2550)—Lee Boroson's **"Underpass"** is a bright-blue, nearly weightless public sculpture that rises from fourteen feet at its lowest point to a full height of more than forty feet and hovers above the leafy corporate atrium. At first glance, it looks stunningly goofy, like a cross between an air mattress and a freeway cloverleaf. But it's also slyly site-specific: the sloping central trajectory of the piece echoes that of the actual highway ramp (the Grand Central Station overpass) visible outside the atrium window. Striking and yet flamboyantly harmless, this Brobdingnagian crib toy proclaims Boroson the cheerful aerial alternative to Richard Serra. Through March 17. (Open weekdays, 11 to 6, and Thursday evenings until 7:30.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (769-5100)—The Hayden Planetarium, in the new glass-sheathed Rose Center, looks like what might have arisen if Sony had commissioned I. M. Pei to build the Centre Pompidou. Space Show tickets, designed as 3-D postcard-size "passports to the universe," let you enjoy a twenty-minute cosmic journey, narrated by Tom Hanks, which goes from Earth to the Milky Way out to the Virgo Supercluster, then through a black hole right back home. You can cruise the new building, size up exhibits that boggle the mind with postulations like "On this time line, each step you take is seventy-five million years long," and watch a mini star show that begins, "Hello and welcome to the Big Bang. I'm Jodie Foster." The planetarium opens on Feb. 19, with reservations for regular Space Shows advised, and available at 769-5200. ♦ **"Body Art: Marks of Identity."** Through May 29. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 8:45.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART
Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—The latest installment in the museum's **"Working in Brooklyn"** exhibitions showcases artists' books, including "Gazelle in the Donkey Stable," by Louise Bourgeois, "Miss Gowanus," by Meg Belichick, Janet Zweig's flip-book "Scheherezade," and Peggy Doody's "A Very Famous Artist in a Williamsburg Studio Tour." Through April 16. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5; Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

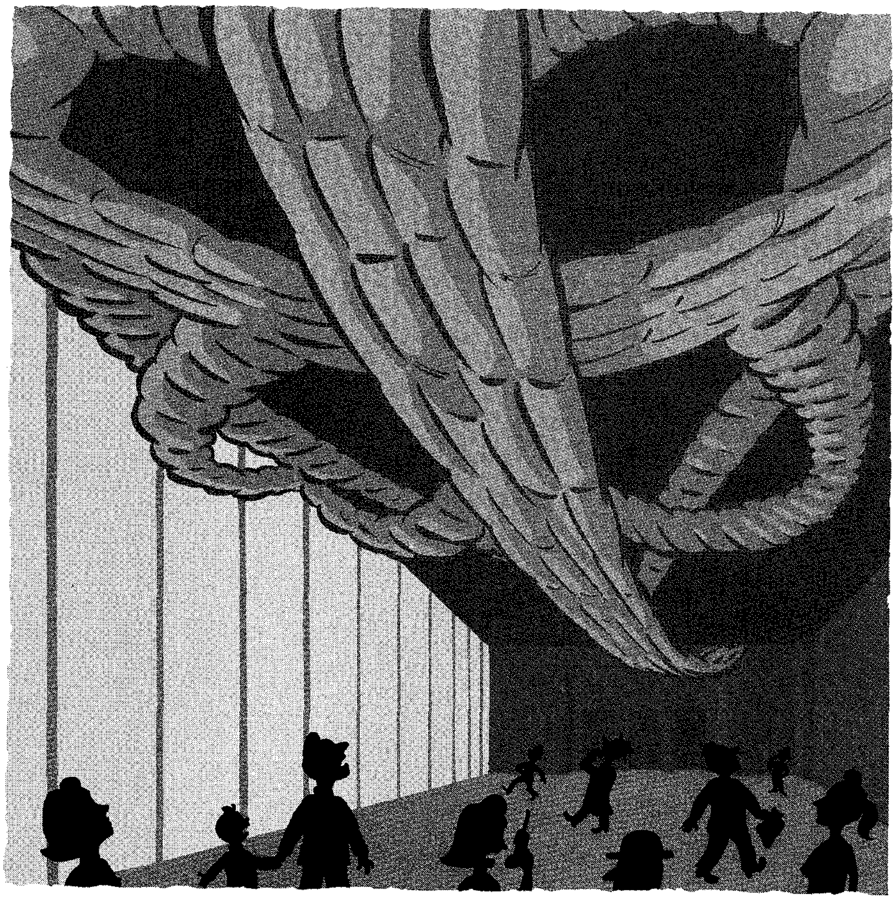
FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
Seventh Ave. at 27th St. (217-5800)—David Levinthal has moved from ambiguously lifelike Barbie noir to full-on Barbie fashion shoots, showing these 1959-67 "teen fashion models" as they are, paint drips and all. Give Mattel credit for the makeup, applied permanently at each dollface's birth, and Levinthal's stylist Laura Meisner for the perfect coiffure. If the closeup "Untitled 66" seems particularly effective, perhaps that's because it's the most direct, with Barbie's perennially sidelong glance angled straight at the viewer. Through April 15. (Open Tuesdays through Fridays, noon to 8; Saturdays, 10 to 5.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.

BERNARD CHAET
Landscapes by this gruff, venerable painter and teacher. Though his favorite subject—the New England coast—has been tarnished by generations of Sunday painters, Chaet renews it, charging the rocky horizon with skidding, nearly abstract arpeggios of raw color. "Night Ends," one of the finest of the new canvases, shows columns of mist rising from the ocean toward a vastly complicated sky, so packed with shards of cloud that it resembles a shattered windshield. There's nothing new here, just plenty of old-fashioned exhilaration. Through Feb. 26. (MB Modern, 41 E. 57th St. 371-3444.)

PABLO PICASSO
A print exhibition devoted to a single theme: the artist contemplating his model/muse/mistress.



"Underpass," an installation by Lee Boroson, at the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris.

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

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TABLES FOR TWO

71 CLINTON FRESH FOOD
71 Clinton St. (614-6960)—There's hardly any room for décor at this tiny, sleek storefront (formerly a Chirping Chicken), but one Pompeii-red wall and some flattering recessed lighting keep it from feeling cramped or tense. As the first serious restaurant among the cool shops and bars taking over the Lower East Side, 71 Clinton might be hard to sell to a dinner date, but mentioning the chef—Wylie Dufresne, a baby-faced alumnus of Jean-Georges Vongerichten's luxe kitchens—should help.

Each dish here has one concise idea, and, yes, all the ingredients are exceedingly fresh. Some of the appetizers must require surgical skill to construct: shrimp is transplanted into a grilled squid, a geodesic dome of avocado encloses salmon tartare, and, in a virtual one-plate picnic, cider-glazed foie-gras terrine is hidden in a Macoun apple. Unexpected textures add depth—a starter of tagliatelle with braised rabbit leg is laced with poppy seeds. The best main course, black sea bass, is prepared with a surprising but successful *edamame* (soybean) and rye-bread crust. Though fish is Dufresne's specialty, the beer-braised short ribs are worth a detour. They arrive, almost brownielike, perched on their bones, which have been transformed into little Eames ottomans.

Precision guides the short and smart wine list, which emphasizes reasonably priced Spaniards. The excellent desserts are spiked with herbs and spices. Tropical-fruit spring rolls with coconut ice cream are laid out like pavilions from the 1939 World's Fair, with basil-syrup latticework. And the Stilton-and-bosc-pear terrine with black-pepper caramel might be the best cheese dessert around.

The avuncular man ambling around in a sweater vest is actually Dufresne's dad, and he can be spotted inspecting the silverware and chatting knowledgeably with the foxy young patrons about the food. When a diner asks him whether he's worried that his son's restaurant will become too successful, he replies: "I don't want to push out the bodega next door. I guess we'll just pull my van up front and put a couple more tables in there." (Open Mondays through Saturdays for dinner. Entrées $14-$22.)

Sometimes the setting is a studio, sometimes a cabaret or a brothel. But the action is always the same: hungrily, tenderly, diffidently, Boy stares across the page at Girl. Boy appears under a variety of guises—squat, balding Spaniard; bearded Greco-Roman patrician; even Degas. Girl, meanwhile, is a veritable Rolodex of physiognomies, shifting at will from Marie-Thérèse to Dora to Jacqueline. For the viewer, what's most seductive is Picasso's line, never more magical and decisive than in his prints. Through March 11. (Krugier, 41 E. 57th St. 755-7288.)

Short List

PHILIP EVERGOOD
ACA, 41 E. 47th St. 644-8300.
Through Feb. 26.
HELEN FRANKENTHALER
Ameringer Howard, 41 E. 57th St.
935-1110. Through March 11.
WES MILLS
Helman, 20 W. 57th St. 245-2888.
Through Feb. 26.
RAPHAEL SOYER
Forum, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St.
355-4545. Through March 4.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

HARRY BERTOIA (1915-78)
The Robert Miller gallery, until recently an anchor of Fifty-seventh Street, celebrates the opening of its new Chelsea space with a display of musical sculptures by this Italian-born designer. Resembling natural forms such as cattails, weeping willows, and pine branches, the constructions are mild on the eye and on the ear. Blow or brush against the smaller ones and they respond with pleasant rustlings and sighings. For a more substantial thrill, borrow a mallet from the gallery staff and you can listen to the big bronze gongs reverberate down the block. Through Feb. 26. (526 W. 26th St. 366-4774.)

Short List

HALUK AKAKÇE
Urbach Architecture, 526 W. 26th St.
627-0974. Through March 11.
JEFF ELROD
Hearn, 530 W. 22nd St. 727-7366. Through
Feb. 26.
SANTI MOIX
Kasmin, 293 Tenth Ave., at 27th St.
563-4474. Through March 11.
SAM TAYLOR-WOOD
Marks, 522 W. 22nd St. 243-1650. Through
Feb. 26.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

SERGEI EISENSTEIN
Though unlikely to eclipse "The Battleship Potemkin" anytime soon, the Russian filmmaker's exuberant drawings merit consideration. Nearly half the show is dedicated to run-of-the-mill costume sketches ("Harlem Snake Dancer" is pure Bob Fosse), but the Dionysian feeding and breeding frenzy elsewhere makes up for it, as does the existential musing in works like "Life Leaving the Body Forever," where a feathery stick figure blithely gives the mortal coil the old soft shoe. Through March 18. (The Drawing Center, 35 Wooster St. 219-2166.)
"MANLY"
Ours may be, as James Brown said, a man's, man's, man's world, but you wouldn't know it from the gender-bending, cross-dressing, tongue-in-cheek works selected by curator Grady T. Turner. Among the more memorable riffs on masculinity are penis cozies, knitted from brightly colored yarn (by Vita Bujvid), elegant hand-sewn toreador uniforms (José Gabriel Fernandez), and photographs of boyish underwear parties (Anthony Goicolea). Most of the works here aim for humor, though few hit funny dead-on. A favorite, the video by a collaborative team who call themselves Type A, shows two businessmen on a crowded street solemnly shaking hands for the better part of an hour. Through April 1. (Art in General, 79 Walker. 219-0473.)
"PIN-UPS 2000"
Of the three prominent illustrators on view, Hubert de Lartigue offers the most traditional fare. His impish nudes, with their apricot skin and burgundy lips, are crisp, classic demonstrations of airbrush technique. Boris Vallejo and Julie Bell work in the more exotic precincts of "science fiction/fantasy," a genre that is the oil-paint equivalent of professional wrestling. Female bodybuilders, clad in nothing but silver Mylar, sashay around futuristic ruins. Pterodactyls are sometimes, but not always, in attendance. Bell, a former female bodybuilder herself, is a rarity in the field, not only for her gender but for the fact that she models for her own works, as well as those of her husband Vallejo. In his "Aurora," for example, Bell appears as a mythological goddess, tugging open a chink in the clouds to reveal a panorama of granite mountains. If Richard Wagner were alive today, he might be sending Bell mash notes. Through Feb. 26. (Meisel, 141 Prince St. 677-1340.)

Short List

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN
Harvey, 537 Broadway. 925-7651.
Through Feb. 26.
SHERYL L. RUBINSTEIN
Bridgewater/Lustberg & Blumenfeld, 560
Broadway. 941-6355. Through March 11.
H. C. WESTERMANN
Lennon, Weinberg, 560 Broadway.
941-0012. Through Feb. 26.

GALLERIES—BROOKLYN

YASSER AGGOUR / SARA CHING-YU SUN
Egyptian-American Aggour exhibits photographs of himself as a Travis Bickle-like terrorist and hand-painted portraits of figures like Margaret Thatcher, Salman Rushdie, and the Ayatollah Khomeini. Satirizing Western paranoia about Middle Easterners, Aggour poses his laughing family around the dinner table wearing the nylon stockings of airplane hijackers. / Ching-Yu Sun's Rube Goldberg-style interactive installation involves a pair of binoculars and headphones, the use of which triggers a Web-cam projection in the back of the gallery, with a video monitor installed in a laundromat across the street. Through Feb. 28. (Momenta Art, 72 Berry St. 718-218-8058.)
FLURRY
In this sometimes playful, sometimes sombre group exhibition, eleven Brooklyn artists riff on the timely subject of snow. Sun K. Kwak's swirling, masking-tape mural illustrates the show's title in black and white; Elizabeth Zawada's decorative, crochetlike floor piece points up new uses for Wite-Out; and Greg Stone's elegant diamond shapes on paper, created by dripping hot tar, somehow recall the organization of a snowflake. Most elegiac of the group are Robert Kalka's Plexiglas-encased mini-environments. Containing the skeletal structures of trees, boats, and log cabins, the Petri-dish-like environments take on the look of Kris Kringle's North Pole residence when they grow fluffy with white mold. Through March 11. (Rotunda Gallery, 33 Clinton St. 718-875-4047.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

SOTHEBY'S
Feb. 16: Oriental and European carpets. ♦ Feb. 17-18: Nineteenth-century, twentieth-century, and contemporary prints. ♦ Feb. 22: Watches and clocks. Feb. 23: Impressionist, modern, and contemporary art. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 606-7000.)
DOYLE
Furniture, decorative art works, and paintings. (175 E. 87th St. 427-2730. Feb. 23.)
SWANN
Printed and manuscript African-Americana, including photography, posters, and inscribed books. (104 E. 25th St. 254-4710. Feb. 17.)
THE ART SHOW
Seventy notable galleries from throughout the country, all members of the Art Dealers Association of America, exhibit a wide variety of paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, and photographs. (7th Regiment Armory, Park Ave. at 66th St. Feb. 24-28, with a benefit preview on Feb. 23. For information, call 940-8925.)
GRAMERCY GARDEN ANTIQUES SHOW
A hundred dealers help green-thumbers get prepared for the thaw. (69th Regiment Armory, Lexington Ave. at 25th St. Feb. 25-27, with a benefit preview on Feb. 24. For information, call 255-0020.)

PHOTOGRAPHY

MARTINE FRANCK
This Dutch-born photographer and photojournalist is one of only five female members of the Magnum agency. Her characteristically streamlined 1976 shot of bathers lounging beside an Alain Capeillères pool could be a still from a French version of "8½"; Franck shares Fellini's talent for playful landscapes that testify to the sexiness of black-and-white. Through March 4. (Greenberg, 120 Wooster St. 334-0010.)

TODD HIDO
Middle American and Californian residential landscapes. With David Stephenson. Both shows through Feb. 26. (Saul, 560 Broadway. 431-0747.)

GARY SCHNEIDER
In "Genetic Self-Portrait," the artist uses electron microscopes and X rays to create images of his own biological matter, including hair, DNA, and sperm, at various levels of magnification. The show includes photograms, negatives, and platinum and chromium prints. Feb. 19 through April 9. (International Center of Photography, 1130 Fifth Ave., at 94th St. 860-1777. Open daily, except Mondays, 11-6, and Tuesday evenings until 8.)

"ARTIST/OBJECT"
Still-lifes from nature by Gwen Akin and Allan Ludwig, Amanda Means, Michael Martone, and Janet Russek. Through Feb. 19. (Ricco/Maresca, 529 W. 20th St. 627-4819.)

FRANTISEK VOBECKY
Surrealist-influenced photomontages from the thirties, by this Czech avant-gardist. Through Feb. 26. (Ubu, 16 E. 78th St. 794-4444.)

"ECSTASY"
Photographs of the male figure from the past hundred and twenty years. Artists on view include Eadweard Muybridge, Glen Walls, Bruce of Los Angeles, and Harriet Leibowitz. Through Feb. 20. (Wessel and O'Connor, 242 W. 26th St. 242-8811. Open Sundays.)

"PICTURING GUATEMALA"
More than a century's worth of images from the archives of CIRMA (Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica), including cartes de visite, funerary portraits, plantation promotions, and photographs of an execution during the Estrada Cabrera regime. Through April 16. (Americas Society, Park Ave. at 68th St. 249-8950.)

Short List

ANTONIO
Staley-Wise, 560 Broadway. 966-6223.
Through March 4.

GIACOMO COSTA / WALKER EVANS
Laurence Miller, 20 W. 57th St. 397-3930.
Both shows through Feb. 26.

BOHDAN HOLOMICEK
Leica, 670 Broadway. 777-3051. Opens
Saturdays at noon; through Feb. 26.

LOUISE LAWLER
Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St.
206-7100. Through March 4.

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ
Houk, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St.
750-7070. Through March 4.

FRED W. MC DARRAH
Great Modern Pictures, 17 W. 24th St.
242-2581. Open Sundays; through Feb. 27.

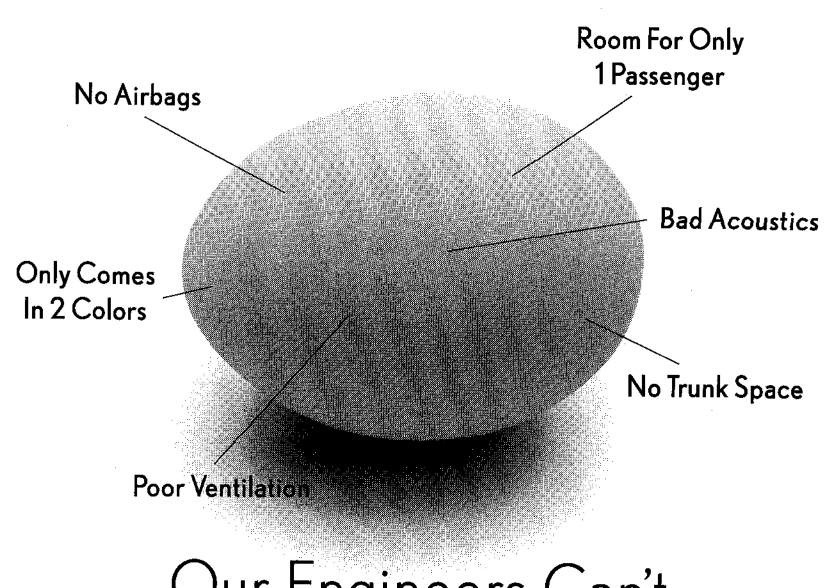
DUANE MICHALS
Pace/MacGill, 32 E. 57th St. 759-7999.
Through March 4.

MARVIN E. NEWMAN
De Lellis, 47 E. 68th St. 327-1482.
Through March 25.

GRETA PRATT
OK Harris, 383 West Broadway.
431-3600. Through Feb. 12.

PATRICK TOSANI
Zabriskie, 41 E. 57th St. 752-1223.
Through March 4.

See the museum listings for a photography exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum.



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TANKED *Sixty years before the "Sensation" scandal, Salvador Dali designed a "Dream of Venus" pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair. It included representations of such Dali images as "Soft Watches," along with a tank in which female divers were supposed to warm themselves in front of a fake fire and practice scales on a human "piano." One of the pavilion's backers, a manufacturer of molded-rubber objects, insisted that the "liquid ladies" wear rubber mermaid tails. When Dali refused, the rubber baron ordered the removal of a piscine headpiece from a female figure. Enraged, Dali wrote a manifesto declaring "man's right to love women with exotic heads of fish" and had copies of it scattered over Manhattan by plane. Performances were cancelled. Eric Schaal, a Life photographer, documented Dali's Surrealist folly in pictures that are on view at Jan Van Der Donk Rare Books through March 4.*

CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

The box-office number for Alice Tully Hall is 875-5050; for Avery Fisher Hall, 875-5030; and for Carnegie Hall and Weill Recital Hall, 247-7800.

METROPOLITAN OPERA

Boito's **"Mefistofele,"** with Veronica Villarroel, Richard Margison, and Samuel Ramey; conducted by Mark Elder. (Feb. 16, Feb. 22, and Feb. 26 at 8, and Feb. 19 at 1:30.) ♦ Opening performances of the company's first-ever production of Franz Lehár's operetta **"The Merry Widow,"** presented in English, with Frederica von Stade, Emily Pulley, Plácido Domingo, Paul Groves, and John Del Carlo; Andrew Davis. (Feb. 17, Feb. 21, and Feb. 25 at 8, and Feb. 28 at 7:30.) ♦ **"Madama Butterfly,"** with Michele Crider, Wendy White, Sergej Larin, and William Shimell; Julius Rudel. (Feb. 18 and Feb. 23 at 8 and Feb. 26 at 1:30.) ♦ **"Les Contes d'Hoffmann,"** with Mary Dunleavy (as Olympia, Antonia, and Stella), Victoria Livengood (as Giulietta), Susanne Mentzer, Neil Shicoff, and Bryn Terfel; Mr. Rudel. (Feb. 19 at 8.) ♦ **"La Cenerentola,"** with Jennifer Larmore, Raúl Giménez, Alessandro Corbelli, Simone Alaimo, and John Relyea; Bruno Campanella. (Feb. 24 and Feb. 29—Rossini's birthday—at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 362-6000.)

SALZBURG MARIONETTE THEATRE

One of Austria's notable tourist attractions (founded in 1913) offers full productions, with lavish sets and costumes, of three Mozart operas, in which the marionettes perform to soundtrack recordings. Feb. 18 at 7: "Le Nozze di Figaro." ♦ Feb. 19 at 2 and Feb. 20 at 3: An hour-long version of "Die Zauberflöte," for younger viewers. ♦ Feb. 19 at 8: "Die Zauberflöte," complete. ♦ Feb. 20 at 7: "Don Giovanni." (Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, Park Ave. at 68th St. 772-4448.)

"DER WEG DER VERHEISSUNG"

Kurt Weill's four-part Biblical drama ran for 153 performances when it was unveiled (in an English version, directed by Max Reinhardt, called "The Eternal Road") at the Manhattan Opera House, in 1937. It was in order to oversee this piece that the composer moved to America in 1935, although he had already fled his native Germany two years earlier for the (temporarily) safe haven of Paris. Despite its critical and popular success, the work went unperformed after its initial run until last June, when it was mounted by the Chemnitz Opera, in Germany. The reasons for its oblivion are clear. Its libretto, by Franz Werfel, attempts to encapsulate several millennia of the history of the Jews, but since the work predates Kristallnacht, the piece would have seemed naïve in light of the momentous years that followed. In any case, its immense forces make untoward demands on any potential presenter: it has no fewer than forty-nine solo roles (with some doubling possible), numerous speaking parts, and a large chorus and orchestra. The Chemnitz production, which retains all the musical content but abbreviates the dialogue, arrives in New York this week, with John Mauceri conducting what is thought to be the largest assemblage of musicians ever crammed onto the stage of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, including the Robert Schumann Philharmonic Orchestra (from Chemnitz) and choirs from Germany and Poland. (30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Feb. 28-29 at 7:30. Through March 5.) ♦ Note: To fill in the picture during this Weill centennial year, BAM is also screening films for which the composer contributed the musical scores; for information, call 718-623-2770.

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

At Avery Fisher Hall. Feb. 17 and Feb. 19 at 8 and Feb. 18 at 11 A.M.: Zubin Mehta conducts two symphonic poems by Strauss: "Don Quixote" (with violist Cynthia Phelps and cellist Carter Brey) and "Symphonia Domestica." ♦ Feb. 23 at 6:45: In an intermissionless concert for the afterwork crowd, Fabio Luisi conducts Saint-Saëns' Piano Concerto No. 2 (featuring Cécile Ousset) and Stravinsky's "Petrushka" (in its 1947 version). ♦ Feb. 24 and Feb. 26 at 8 and Feb. 25 at 2: Mr. Luisi leads Honegger's Symphony No. 3 (the "Symphonie Liturgique"), in addition to the Saint-Saëns and Stravinsky works as above (also with Ms. Ousset).

BRANDENBURG ENSEMBLE

The conductor and violinist/violist Jaime Laredo celebrates the fortieth anniversary of his Carnegie Hall début by leading the chamber orchestra (and doubling as soloist) in Bach's D-Minor Concerto for Two Violins and Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante (K. 364), as well as participating in performances of Leon Kirchner's Piano Trio No. 2 and Mendelssohn's Octet. He's joined by a constellation of starry soloists who have frequently collaborated with him over the years: violinists Pamela Frank, Leila Josefowicz, Ida Kavafian, and Cho-Liang Lin, violists Steven Tenenbom and Michael Tree, and cellists Yo-Yo Ma and Sharon Robinson. (Carnegie Hall. Feb. 16 at 8.)

EOS ORCHESTRA

Jonathan Sheffer conducts pieces by American composers from A (Adams, Amram, and Antheil) to Z (Zappa, Zorn, and Zwilich), with nothing in between. (Ethical Culture Society, 2 W. 64th St. Feb. 17 at 8. For information about tickets, call 691-6415.)

DESSOFF CHOIRS

Handel's D-Minor Organ Concerto (featuring Nancianne Parrella) opens a performance of that composer's oratorio "Israel in Egypt." Kent Tritle directs. (Alice Tully Hall. Feb. 19 at 8.)

SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY

At Carnegie Hall, Michael Tilson Thomas conducting. Feb. 22 at 8: Copland's "Inscape," Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 (with Arcadi Volodos), and Adams' "Harmonielehre." ♦ Feb. 23 at 8: Bernstein's Symphony No. 2 ("The Age of Anxiety," featuring pianist Garrick Ohlsson) and Shostakovich's Symphony No. 11 ("The Year 1905").

VOICES OF ASCENSION

Dennis Keene directs Mozart's "Coronation Mass" and his Requiem (in the familiar Süssmayr edition). (Alice Tully Hall. Feb. 24 at 8.)

ORCHESTRA OF ST. LUKE'S

Alan Gilbert conducts a new work by Joan Tower, in addition to Beethoven's Piano Concerto

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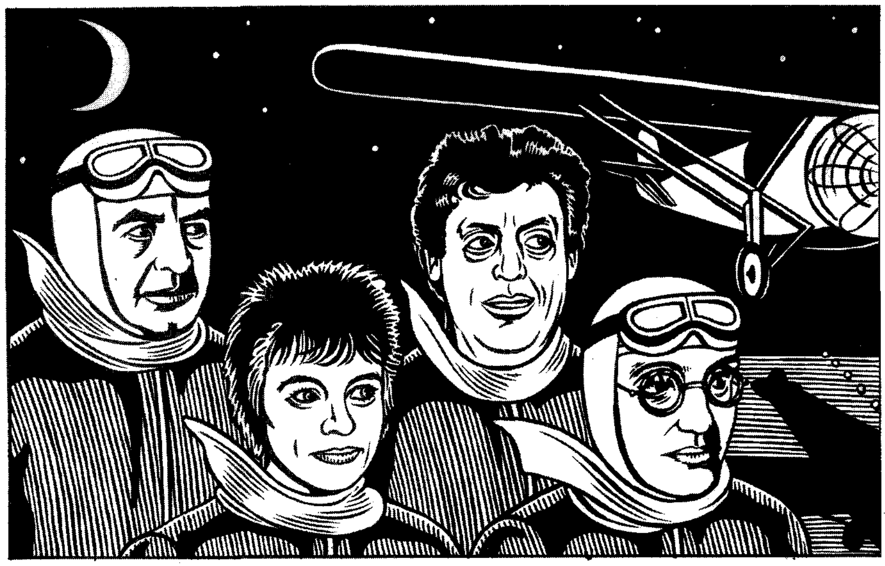


Aeronautically inspired works by Samuel Barber, Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass, and Kurt Weill, performed by the American Composers Orchestra, at Carnegie Hall.

MICHAEL KUPPERMAN

No. 4 (with Christian Zacharias) and Schumann's Symphony No. 2. (Carnegie Hall. Feb. 24 at 8.)

BROOKLYN PHILHARMONIC
Robert Spano conducts orchestral transcriptions of six of Conlon Nancarrow's "Studies for Piano," Weill's "The New Orpheus" (a cantata, here sung in English, featuring soprano Marlene Ralis Rosen and violinist Laura Park), Takemitsu's "Three Film Scores," and Piazzolla's Double Concerto for Guitar, Bandoneon, and String Orchestra. (Harvey Theatre—formerly known as the Majestic Theatre—651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Feb. 25-26 at 8.)

NEW YORK CHAMBER SYMPHONY
Gerard Schwarz conducts Andrzej Panufnik's "Autumn Music," Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 (with violinist Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg), Deborah Drattel's "The Lost Lover" (a première, featuring soprano Lauren Flanigan), and Kodály's "Dances of Galánta." (Alice Tully Hall. Feb. 26 at 8 and Feb. 27 at 5.)

AMERICAN COMPOSERS ORCHESTRA
In this concert, Dennis Russell Davies leads three works inspired by the famous transatlantic voyage of Charles Lindbergh—Weill's "The Lindbergh Flight," Barber's "Night Flight," and Act V from "The White Raven," an opera by Philip Glass and Robert Wilson—in addition to the première of Laurie Anderson's "Songs for A.E.," a piece inspired by another pioneer of aviation, Amelia Earhart. (Carnegie Hall. Feb. 27 at 3.)

ABSOLUTE ENSEMBLE
Kristjan Järvi conducts Steve Reich's "Clapping Music," in addition to symphonic works in chamber arrangements: Berg's "Filmmusik aus 'Lulu' " (in a version by Berthold Tuercke), plus two arrangements created for Schoenberg's Society for Private Musical Performances, which served as a progressive forum in musical Vienna from 1918 to 1921: Debussy's "Prélude à l'Après-Midi d'un Faune" (transcribed by Benno Sachs) and Mahler's Symphony No. 4 (in Erwin Stein's transcription). (Flea Theatre, 41 White St. 226-0051. Feb. 28 at 8.)

MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA
Eiji Oue conducts Aaron Jay Kernis's "Musica Celestis," Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5 (featuring Pinchas Zukerman), and Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5. (Carnegie Hall. Feb. 29 at 8.)

RECITALS

EMERSON STRING QUARTET
At Alice Tully Hall, the ensemble concludes its survey of Shostakovich's quartets. Feb. 16 at 8: The Quartets No. 7, No. 8, and No. 9. ♦ Feb. 23 at 8: The Quartets No. 10, No. 11, and No. 12. ♦ Feb. 27 at 2: The Quartets No. 13, No. 14, and No. 15.

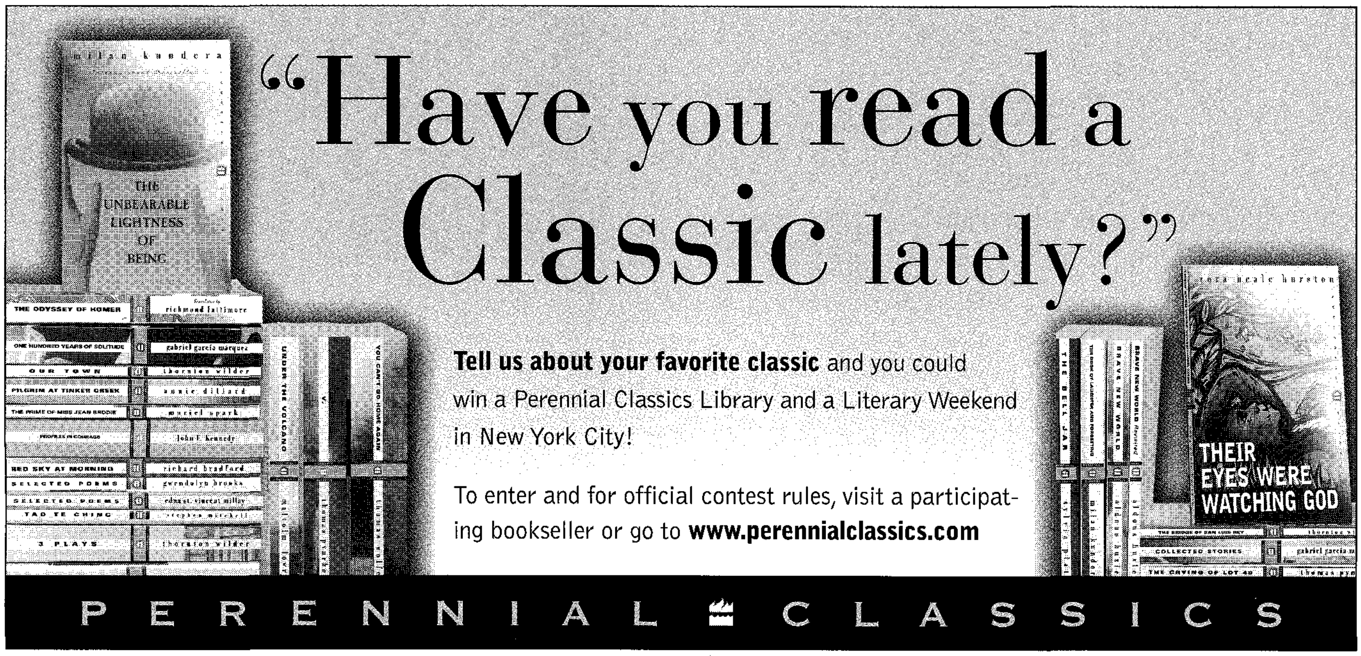
THOMAS HAMPSON
The baritone, assisted by pianist Wolfram Rieger, concludes his survey of Mahler songs with a recital that includes the "Kindertotenlieder" and "Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen." (Carnegie Hall. Feb. 17 at 7:30.)

PETRA LANG AND WOLFGANG HOLZMAIR
The mezzo-soprano and the baritone, assisted by pianist Steven Blier, offer a *Liederabend* of songs about travel, by Schubert, Mahler, Dvořák, and others. (Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, Park Ave. at 68th St. 772-4448. Feb. 17 at 8.)

OLIVIER LATRY
At the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, the organist, one of the three titular organists of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, concludes his survey of Messiaen's music for the "king of instruments." Feb. 17: "Le Banquet Céleste," "L'Ascension," and "Messe de la Pentecôte." ♦ Feb. 22: "Apparation de l'Église Éternelle," "Verset pour la Fête de la Dédicatrice," "Monodie," and "Livre d'Orgue." ♦ Feb. 24: "Neuf Méditations sur le Mystère de la Trinité." ♦ Feb. 29: "Livre du Saint-Sacrement." (Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, Park Ave. at 84th St. 288-2520. Evenings at 8.)

"NEW WORKS AT THE MILLER THEATRE"
This wide-ranging contemporary-music series reaches its conclusion. Feb. 19: Jeffrey Milarski conducts Ensemble Sospeso in works by Wolfgang Rihm. ♦ Feb. 24: Ensemble 21, conducted by Mr. Milarsky, presents pieces by the aesthetically subversive Salvatore Martirano, including his "Cocktail Music" (a salute to sixties lounge music, here featuring cabaret singer Dean Smith) and his "L.'s G. A., for Gas-Masked Politico, Two-Channel Tape Recorder, Three Sixteen-millimeter Film Projectors, and Helium Bomb" (from 1968—ah, the good old days!). ♦ Feb. 26: Vocal and instrumental music by Aaron Jay Kernis, performed by the Eberli Ensemble. (Miller Theatre. Evenings at 8.)

GUARNERI QUARTET
Feb. 19 at 8: Performing quartets by Mozart (in D Minor, K. 421), Schubert (in A Minor, D. 804),



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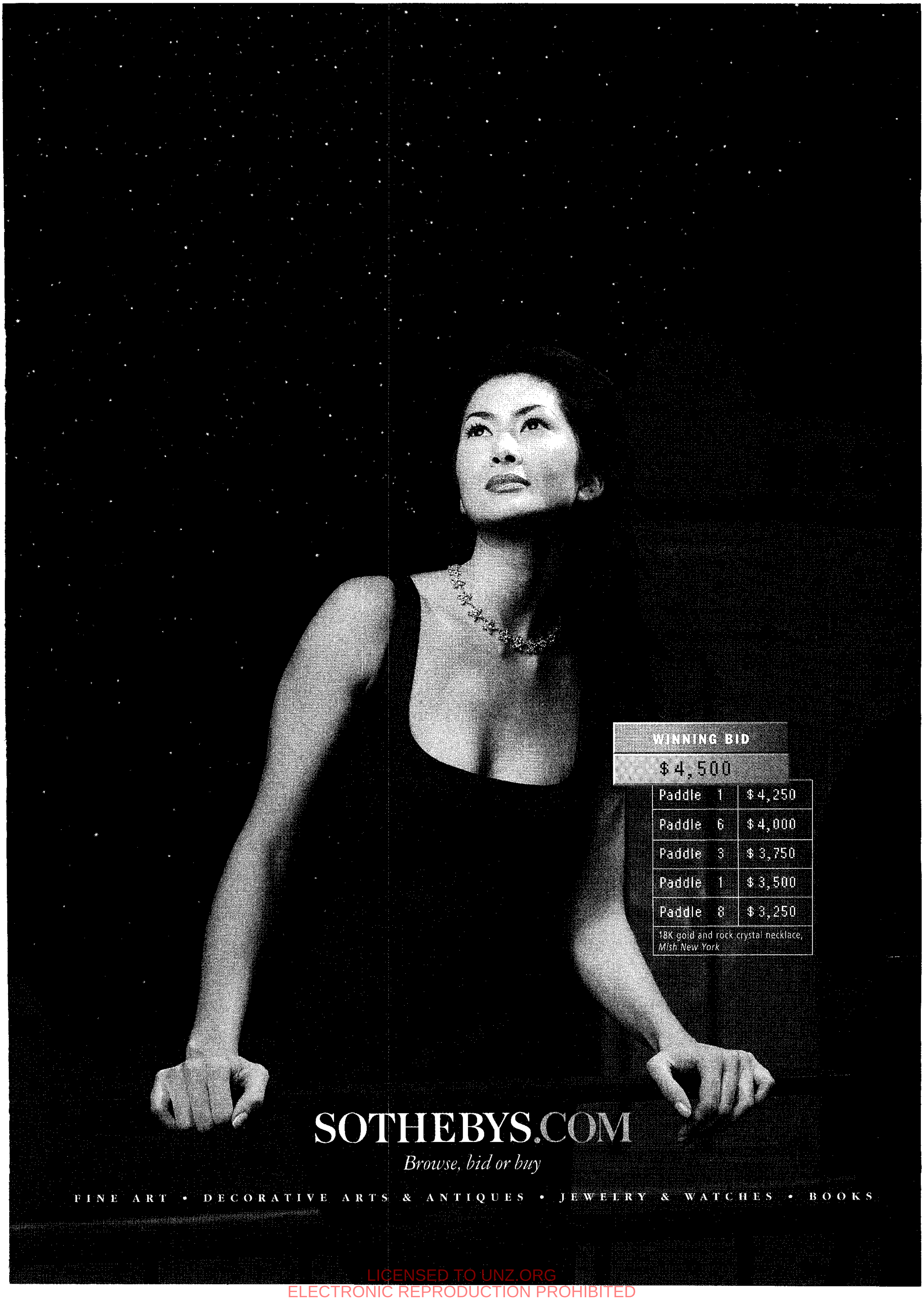

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and Mendelssohn (in F Minor, Op. 80). (Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 83rd St. 570-3949.) ♦ Feb. 29 at 8: Quartets by Haydn (in G Major, Op. 77, No. 1), Beethoven (in F Minor, Op. 95), and Sibelius. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 996-1100.)

RENÉE FLEMING AND JULIE HARRIS
The soprano and the actress team up for an afternoon of readings and song-settings of poems by Emily Dickinson, with pianist Helen Yorke assisting. (Alice Tully Hall. Feb. 20 at 2.)

JAMES GALWAY
The flutist, assisted by the Safri Duo (a Danish percussion ensemble), performs pieces by Amram, Reich, and other mostly twentieth-century composers. (Avery Fisher Hall. Feb. 20 at 3.)

TALLIS SCHOLARS
Peter Phillips directs his ten singers in Byrd's "Mass for Five Voices," as well as contemporaneous motets by Byrd, Robert White, and Alfonso Ferrabosco the Elder, all of which should resound with unusual richness in one of Columbia University's most acoustically impressive spaces. (St. Paul's Chapel, Columbia University, enter at Broadway and 116th St. 854-7799. Feb. 22 at 8.)

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET
In a recital dedicated to the memory of the late Felix Galimir, a mentor to several generations of chamber musicians, this distinguished foursome plays Mendelssohn's Quartet in E Minor (Op. 44, No. 2), Webern's "Five Movements for String Quartet" (Op. 5), and Beethoven's Quartet in F Major (Op. 135). (Juilliard Theatre, 155 W. 65th St. Feb. 22 at 8. For information about free tickets, which are required, call 769-7406.)

ANONYMOUS 4
The women's medieval-music vocal quartet performs music from the trecento, by Landini and others. (Medieval Court, Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 570-3949. Feb. 23 at 8.)

DOMINIQUE LABELLE
The Canadian soprano, assisted by pianist Yehudi Wyner, performs four Handel arias, as well as songs by Debussy, Déodat de Severac, and the Québecois composer Gilles Vigneault. (Weill Recital Hall. Feb. 25 at 8.)

EWA PODLEŚ AND GARRICK OHLSSON
The contralto and the pianist perform music by Chopin, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninoff. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 996-1100. Feb. 27 at 3.)

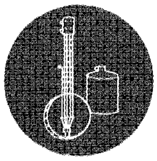
RED PRIEST
This period-instrument quartet (comprising recorder, violin, viola da gamba, and harpsichord) takes its name from Antonio Vivaldi, the Venetian Baroque violinist/composer and lapsed priest whose nickname, "Il Prete Rosso," has led to the widespread assumption that he was a redhead. This concert, the ensemble's first in New York, includes three concertos by Vivaldi, in addition to pieces by other composers. (Frick Collection, 1 E. 70th St. 288-0700. Feb. 27 at 5.)

AX-STERN-LAREDO-MA QUARTET
That's Emanuel, Isaac, Jaime, and Yo-Yo, and in this concert they perform piano quartets by Mozart (in E-Flat Major), Brahms (in C Minor), and Schumann. (Carnegie Hall. Feb. 27 at 8.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

ON THE CUTTING EDGE
Over President's Day weekend, if you notice groups of women wielding four-foot-long swords and moving about ritualistically, don't take it as a sign of preparation for a low-tech coup in advance of the New York primary. It's more likely that you've happened across the fifteenth annual New York Sword Dance Festival. Organized by the local Half Moon Sword team, the festival brings twelve like-minded troupes from the United States and Canada to museums, libraries, and churches around town on Feb. 19 and 20 for a celebration of an art form that originated in the coal-mining regions of Northern England. For information on venues and times, call 718-284-1529.

WORLD MUSIC NOTES



ROUGH EDGES AND RURAL ROOTS
You don't need to go to the ends of the earth to encounter exotic music. Shanachie Entertainment's Yazoo label has been doing yeoman's service for America's home-grown traditional music for decades; its catalogue reaches back through time to rediscover the rural roots of styles whose descendants remain in flower today. In 1998, its **"Classic Recordings of the 1920's and 30's"** series was enriched by two volumes, both titled **"Ruckus Juice & Chittlins,"** that trace the history of Appalachian jug bands, early blues and bluegrass string ensembles in which earthenware vessels puff out oompah bass lines and more florid riffs. By 1900, jug bands were turning up in Louisville, Kentucky, and, soon, other mid-Southern cities, where their sounds were captured on records—some of which are now extremely rare—that serve as Yazoo's mother lode. The two dozen soloists and ensembles on these disks cover a lot of stylistic territory, from the decidedly backwoods to the commercially polished. Among the collection's high points are the Memphis Jug Band's "Cocaine Habit Blues," which is typical in the way it puts a down-and-dirty, thoroughly entertaining spin on even the most dire circumstances.

The most recent additions to Yazoo's series are volumes three and four of a collection titled **"Times Ain't Like They Used to Be,"** an engrossing tour of regional music-making from a time when isolation helped keep local traditions distinct. Rather than let these tracks fly by as an entertaining succession of country fiddlers, banjo pickers, shaped-note singers, and washboard bands, listeners should stop to savor the collection's astonishing variety. The Baptist gospel blues guitarist Blind Willie Johnson, from Marlin, Texas, is so gravel-voiced that his sound, in "I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole," approaches Central Asian overtone singing (and his signature slide guitar-playing serves as lagniappe). Mississippi blues pioneer Charlie Patton offers chantlike cantillation, in the entirely secular "Magnolia Blues," that is as powerful as it is unpolished. And, in one of the most moving tracks, Reverend D. C. Rice, displaced from Alabama to the Holiness Church in Chicago, shows how a sermon can slip into song through the time-honored technique of call-and-response before spilling over into a full-fledged anthem of celebratory ecstasy.

READINGS
Feb. 16 at 8: By Erica Jong, Melvin Jules Bukiet, Helen Schulman, and other writers, from "Neurotica: Jewish Writers on Sex." (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 864-5400.) ♦ Feb. 18 at 7:30: By Jorie Graham and Paul Muldoon, from their poetry, and Colson Whitehead, from his fiction. (Friends Meeting House, 15 Rutherford Pl., between Second and Third Aves. For more information, call 254-3660.) ♦ Feb. 20 at 7:30: By Salar Abdoh and Mohsin Hamid, from their respective novels "The Poet Game" and "Moth Smoke." (Temple Bar, 332 Lafayette St. No tickets necessary.)

TALKS
Feb. 16 at 8: Singer-songwriter Toshi Reagon, *Newsday* cultural critic Richard Torres, and Chocolate Genius frontman Marc Anthony Thompson discuss black culture, the underground, and the music business. (The Den at Two Boots, Avenue A at Third St. Tickets at the door.) ♦ Feb. 24 at 5: Artist Lesley Dill talks about working with the human figure. (New York Academy of Art, 111 Franklin St. 966-0300.)

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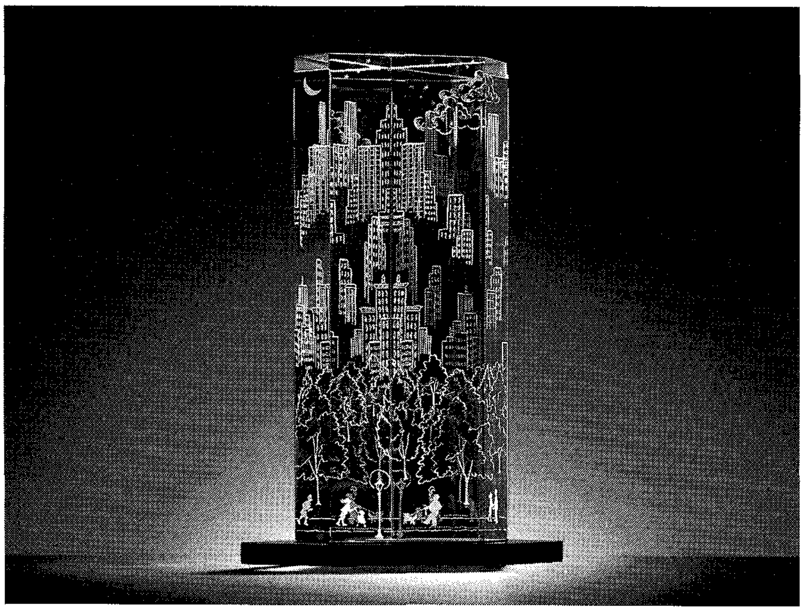

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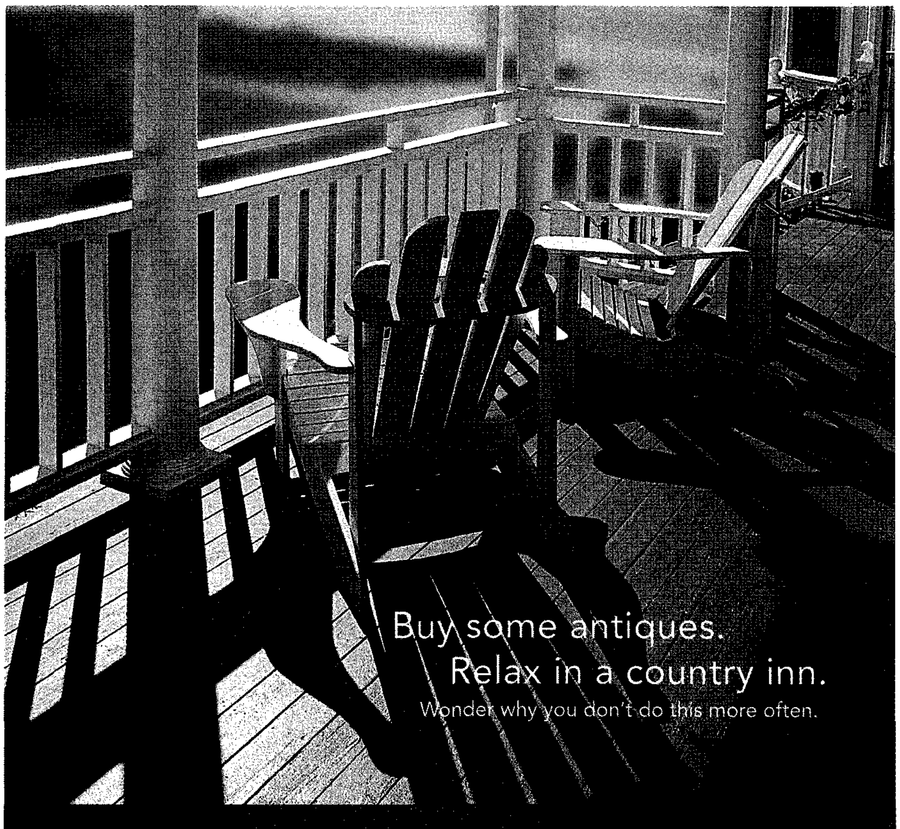

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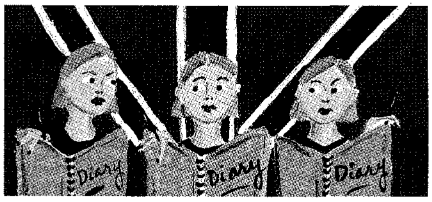

The chocolate-scarfing, cigarette-sneaking heroine of the 1997 novel **BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY** may never find a husband, but she need not be lonely. A hen party of British authors has produced a wave of single-girl comedies—just in time to compete with Fielding's sequel, **BRIDGET JONES: THE EDGE OF REASON** (Viking).

In **THE TRIALS OF TIFFANY TROTT** (Onyx), by Isabel Wolff, the heroine is an aging ad writer who reënters the dating scene when her "mimsy, fussy, girly" boyfriend Alex flees, apparently overcome by guilt that he hasn't yet proposed to her. Tiffany is nonplussed. "Marriage?" she says. "Good Lord, no. It never entered my mind." Tiffany bides her time with bounders and bores until she attracts a dashing married man nicknamed "Seriously Successful." When Successful leaves his wife, though, Tiffany suddenly finds him "Seriously Suffocating."

Jem, the star of Lisa Jewell's novel **RALPH'S PARTY** (Plume), moves in with Ralph, an artist, and Smith, a financial type, convinced that one of them represents her destiny. She chooses Smith, and Ralph takes it upon himself to rectify the error. A little mustard, spattered on her during a "just-friends" breakfast, sparks his interest. Ralph towels the mustard off Jem's thigh, but "would quite happily have licked it off her."

SIMPLY DIVINE (New American Library), by Wendy Holden, uses lively, punning prose to tell the story of Jane, who ghostwrites the social life of a posh party girl named Champagne D'Vyne. "If Champagne had the legs of a racehorse she had the brain of one, too," Jane muses. In Holden's tartly rosy world, Jane's work throws her into the path of her ideal beau, and Cinderella gets both the prince and the kingdom. Now, what could be more absolutely fabulous than that?

—*Liesl Schillinger*

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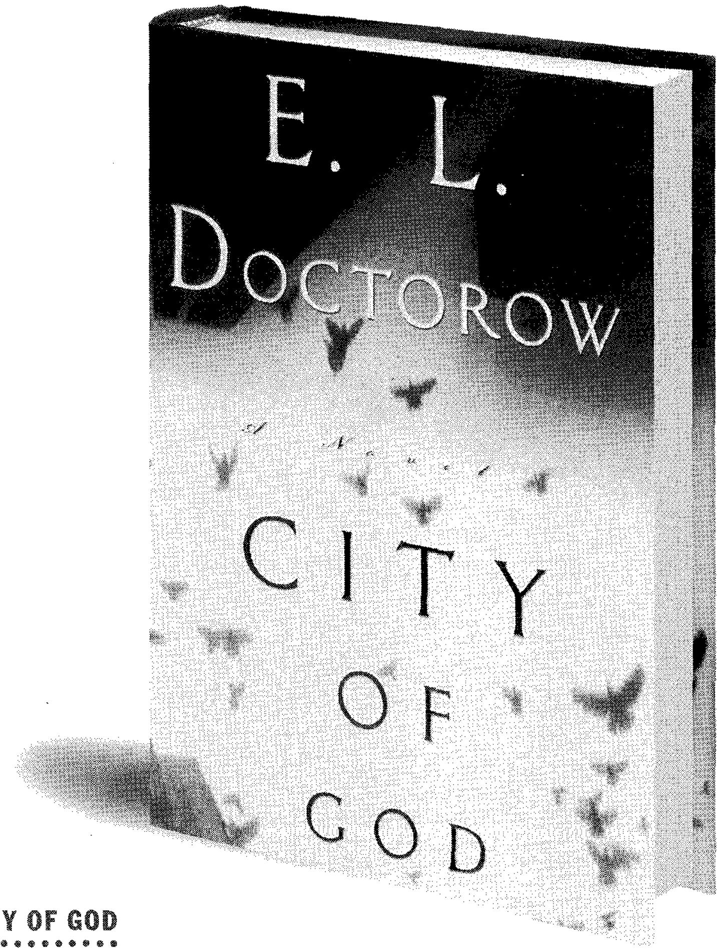
"So the theory has it that the universe
expanded exponentially from a point,
a singular space/time point, a moment/thing,
some original particulate event or substantive happenstance,
to an extent that the word explosion is inadequate,
though the theory is known as the Big Bang."
—Excerpt from *City of God*



CITY OF GOD

by E. L. Doctorow

An act of desecration strikes two Manhattan houses of worship in the latest novel from the National Book Award-winning author of *Ragtime* and *Billy Bathgate*. When a brass cross that was stolen from St. Timothy's Episcopal Church mysteriously reappears on the roof of the Upper West Side's Synagogue for Evolutionary Judaism, a joint clerical investigation begins. In an evocative and wickedly humorous masterwork, Doctorow examines the basic precepts and religious traditions of the clerics and scientists, war veterans and politicians, journalists and reporters inextricably drawn into this prophetic New York tale. (Random House).

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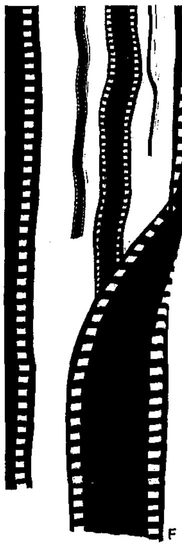


MOVIES
OPENING

BOILER ROOM
A college dropout (Giovanni Ribisi) joins a hard-sell stock operation on Long Island. Written and directed by Ben Younger. Opening Feb. 18.

CLAIRE DOLAN
Katrin Cartlidge plays a young Irish prostitute in New York City who falls in love with a cab driver. Directed by Lodge Kerrigan. Opening Feb. 25. (Walter Reade Theatre.)

THE CLOSER YOU GET
A group of men in an Irish village advertise for brides in America, in this comedy directed by Aileen Ritchie. Opening Feb. 25.

DETERRENCE
In 2008, Saddam Hussein's son attacks U.S. peacekeeping troops, risking nuclear war. Directed by Rod Lurie. With Kevin Pollak and Timothy Hutton. Opening Feb. 25.

HANGING UP
A comedy about three sisters (Meg Ryan, Lisa Kudrow, and Diane Keaton) who must care for their elderly father (Walter Matthau). Directed by Diane Keaton. Opening Feb. 18.

JUDY BERLIN
Eric Mendelsohn wrote and directed this film about what happens in a suburban Long Island town on the day of a solar eclipse. With Madeline Kahn. Opening Feb. 25.

KADOSH
A love story set within the Orthodox Jewish community of Jerusalem. Directed by Amos Gitai. In Hebrew. Opening Feb. 16. (Film Forum.)

LOUIS PRIMA: THE WILDEST
Don McGlynn's documentary follows the life of the jazz-musician hepcat, from his childhood in New Orleans to the glitz of Vegas. Opening Feb. 25. (Cinema Village.)

MIFUNE
A Dogma '95 film directed by Søren Kragh-Jacobsen, about a young Copenhagen man who claims he's an orphan. In Danish. Opening Feb. 25. (Angelika Film Center.)

NOT ONE LESS
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Feb. 18.

PARIAH
An interracial couple is attacked by skinheads in this drama written and directed by Randolph Kret. Opening Feb. 18. (The Screening Room.)

PITCH BLACK
A spaceship crash-lands on a seemingly lifeless planet in this sci-fi thriller directed by David Twohy. With Vin Diesel. Opening Feb. 18.

REINDEER GAMES
John Frankenheimer directed this thriller with Ben Affleck as an ex-con unwillingly drawn into a major casino heist. Opening Feb. 25.

THE WAITING GAME
Ken Liotta wrote and directed this drama about six aspiring actors/waiters in New York City. Opening Feb. 25.

THE WHOLE NINE YARDS
Bruce Willis plays a mob hit man hiding out in suburban Montreal in this action comedy. Directed by Jonathan Lynn. Opening Feb. 18.

WONDER BOYS
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Feb. 25.

FILM NOTES

If a movie has been reviewed recently in The Current Cinema, the date of its review is given.

THE BEACH
A cautionary tale for travellers, in which Richard (Leonardo DiCaprio) arrives in Thailand, learns of a mythical beach, and makes the elementary mistake of trying to find it. He and his companions swim to Paradise, and soon human malevolence is running high, thanks to the tensions among the happy campers who live by the water. There is the scary Sal (Tilda Swinton) and the charming Françoise (Virginie Ledoyen), both of whom already have boyfriends, and both of whom hit on Richard. (Someone should have explained to them that a crush on DiCaprio is not exactly an unprecedented emotion.) The film skitters along nicely for the first half; from then on, it grows dark and deadly, as Richard—and sometimes the images on screen—start to go mad. (When the whole thing briefly turns into a video game, are we meant to ponder the crowded horrors of Western consciousness, or merely to be annoyed?) The director is Danny Boyle, the screenwriter is John Hodge, and the producer is Andrew Macdonald; together they made "Shallow Grave" and "Trainspotting," and you wonder whether they were wise to quit the Scottish turf they know so well. This movie, which was adapted from the bestselling Alex Garland novel, wants so badly to be a cult that it forgets to be any good.—*Anthony Lane* (1/14/00) (Chelsea Cinemas, Criterion Center, East 86th Street Cinemas, First & 62nd Cinemas, Murray Hill Cinemas, and Union Square.)

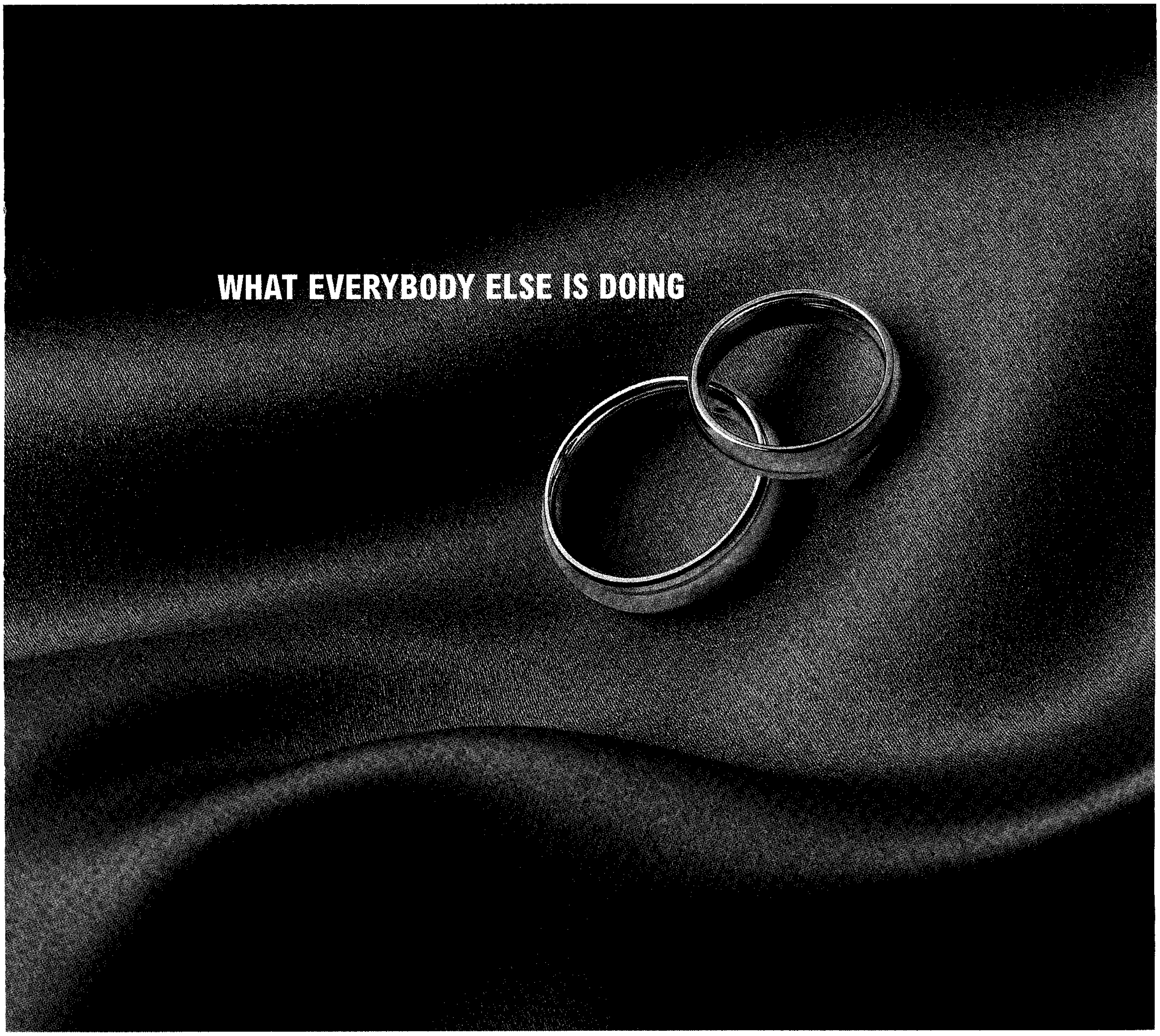
BLUE VELVET (1986)
Written and directed by David Lynch, this is possibly the only coming-of-age movie in which sex has the danger and the heightened excitement of a horror picture. The charged erotic atmosphere makes the film something of a trance-out, but Lynch's humor keeps breaking through, too. His fantasies may come from his unconscious, but he recognizes them for what they are, and he's tickled by them. The setting is an archetypal small, sleepy city in an indefinite mythic present that feels like the past, and Kyle MacLachlan is Jeffrey, the clean-cut young man who's scared of his dirty thoughts (but wants to have them anyway). He commutes between the blue lady of the night (Isabella Rossellini, who's a dream of a freak) and the sunshine girl he loves (Laura Dern). The movie has so much aural-visual humor and poetry that it's sustained despite the wobbly plot and other weaknesses. With Dennis Hopper, who gives the movie a jolt of horrific energy, and Dean Stockwell, who is a smiling wonder as Ben the sandman.—*Pauline Kael* (Film Forum; Feb. 26.)

BOYS DON'T CRY
A delicately conceived but fearless movie. In small-town Nebraska, a young woman named Teena Brandon (Hilary Swank) clips her hair into a butch cut, flattens her breasts, puts on boys' clothes and a boy's swagger, and passes in the world as Brandon Teena, handsome young dude. What she feels is pure exhilaration, the excitement of leaving her past behind and becoming a lover; what we feel is dismay and fear. Brandon falls in with a group of derelict, white-trash kids and attracts the languid beauty Lana (Chloë Sevigny), who allows herself to think that Brandon is a man—with inevitably disastrous results. The movie is a fine, terrifying tragic poem that is also, at times, subversively funny: the women who like Brandon seem to want the feminine as well as the masculine in a lover. Director Kimberly Peirce, who wrote the screenplay with Andy Bienen, embraces a full-bodied lyrical realism in which nothing is exaggerated but nothing is avoided either. With Peter Sarsgaard and Brendan Sexton III as two mangy ex-cons, and Jeannetta Arnette as Lana's boozing mom, who desperately hopes that everything will come out all right. Based on actual events, which were the subject of a 1998 documentary called "The Brandon Teena Story."—*David Denby* (10/18-25/99) (Criterion Center, Murray Hill Cinemas, Quad Cinema, and 64th and 2nd.)

THE CUP
Khyentse Norbu, a Tibetan incarnate lama, directed this spare, simply produced picture that tells the story of a group of young monks who ask their abbot for permission to rent a television set so they can watch the final match of the 1998 World Cup. (The monks root for France, "the only country that has always supported Tibet.") Norbu shot the film at Chokling monastery in India, and all of the "characters" are actual monks, who mostly play themselves. The Tibet typically shown to us by Hollywood is so freighted with consequence that it's refreshing to see a monastery depicted as a kind of New Age prep school, complete with a jocular give-and-take among the masters and pupils and surreptitious peeks at girlie magazines. A thirteen-year-old novice, Jamyang Lordo, shines as a cheeky troublemaker who worships the Brazilian superstar Ronaldo. ("He has a shaved head, but he is not a monk.") All is not lightness, though. The Chinese occupation of Tibet is frequently hinted at, and the young monks' love of soccer, while mirthful and humanizing, shows the difficulty of preserving Tibetan culture in exile. Norbu does much here with very little; his film is a testament to the power of understatement. In Tibetan and Hindi.—*Michael Agger* (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

GIRL, INTERRUPTED
It's 1967 and a depressed and "promiscuous" upper-middle-class Boston girl seems to have just two choices: the Seven Sisters or the psychiatric ward. Susanna Kaysen's memoir of the time she spent "resting" in the élite McLean Psychiatric Hospital (Sylvia Plath was an alumna) has been adapted by James Mangold, with Winona Ryder, using her doe eyes and rheumy voice to good effect, as Kaysen. However, Angelina Jolie, the ward's truth-telling sociopath, provides the main spark and delivers the film's sharpest lines. Sanity arrives in the form of rock and roll, the talking cure, and Whoopi Goldberg, who plays a worldly-wise nurse. With his mental-ward setting, Mangold wants to provide a fresh perspective on the sixties, but he ends up merely institutionalizing them.—*M.A.* (Chelsea Cinemas, First & 62nd Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Cinema 1 and 2, and Union Square.)

HOLY SMOKE
A mad new movie from Jane Campion, who has forsaken the incisiveness of "An Angel at My Table" and "The Piano" for something close to an acid trip. Kate Winslet plays Ruth, a young Australian woman who travels to India and falls victim to—or, from her point of view, finds peace and poise with—a religious cult. Her family lures her back to Sydney and hires an "exit counselor" to clear out her mind. Given that this counselor is supposed to be the voice of sanity in the movie, it is unfortunate that Campion assigned the role to Harvey Keitel. Winslet, by comparison, seems wholly in control—by turns lucid and lubricious, and always alive to the comedy of the situation. Thank heaven somebody is, because, long before

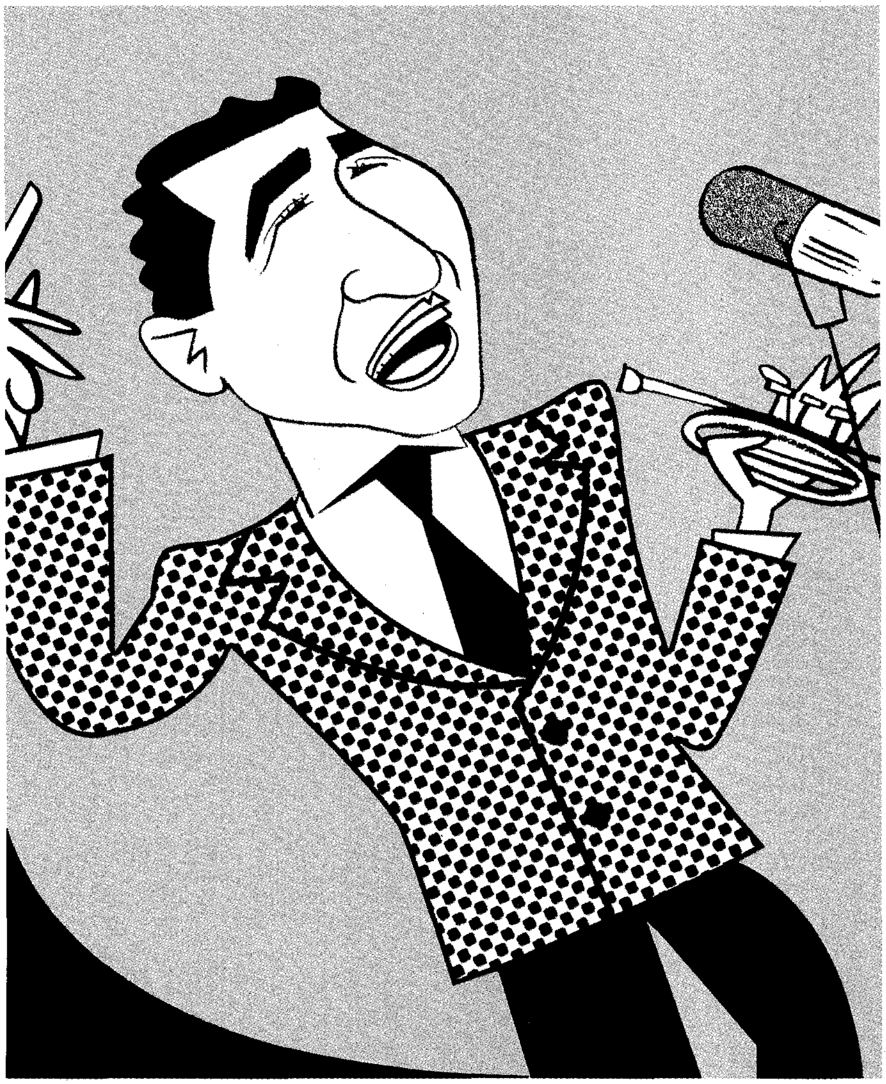


WHAT EVERYBODY ELSE IS DOING

the end, the film drifts into the outback and starts wandering around in circles. The forced weirdness of the imagery and the slightly weary satire of bourgeois existence do not make for an appetizing mix. In fact, the whole thing could use a little exit counselling.—*A.L.* (1/17/00) (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

THE HURRICANE

A very square inspirational movie, factually untrustworthy, about the black boxer Rubin (Hurricane) Carter, a contender for the middleweight crown, who was locked up in 1967 for murders that he did not commit, and who spent years in prison refashioning himself as a lean, ascetic thinker and militant—the icon of the African-American male unjustly incarcerated. As Carter, Denzel Washington offers his usual concentration, quickness, and stern, appraising gaze; he's great, but the movie is a crock, a liberal fairy tale about a black American teen-ager (Vicellous Reon Shannon) and three white Canadian do-gooders (Liev Schreiber, John Hannah, and Deborah Kara Unger) who perform the investigative work that leads to Carter's release. The movie slights the work of lawyers who worked for Carter without fees for years, and neglects to tell us that Carter had been imprisoned once for three muggings before his arrest for the murders. Directed, clunkily, by Norman Jewison; written by Armyan Bernstein and Dan Gordon.—*D.D.* (1/10/00) (Beekman, Criterion Center, 84th Street Sixplex, Kips Bay Theatre, Olympia I and II, Orpheum VII, and Union Square.)



Opening February 25 at Cinema Village, "Louis Prima: The Wildest."

ROBERT RISKO

MAGNOLIA

In Paul Thomas Anderson's new movie, the characters break down, fall apart, and denounce themselves and others. "Magnolia" consists of multiple vignettes set in the San Fernando Valley, but since there's no common theme, the picture becomes a kind of mad crackup derby. Much of the material is earnest Arthur Miller-type stuff about how we can't escape the past, we can't escape the evil we've done, we all need to be truthful with one another, and so on. The ideas are banal, but Anderson ("Boogie Nights") plays each sequence in real time and cuts among them with remarkable fluency, and the actors have some tremendous arialike moments—especially Julianne Moore as an adulterous young wife, John C. Reilly as an angelic cop looking for love, and Tom Cruise as some sort of sex guru who hosts a cable-TV show called "Seduce and Destroy." With Jason Robards, Philip Seymour Hoffman, and William H. Macy.—*D.D.* (12/20/99) (Chelsea Cinemas, Cinema I, East 86th Street Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, and Union Square.)

A MAP OF THE WORLD

Sigourney Weaver, of the high-altitude clavicle and formidable brow, plays Alice, an intellectual farmwife who, in a moment of inattention, fails to prevent a little girl from drowning in a pond and becomes an enemy of the people. This serious, morally alert adaptation of the nuanced Jane Hamilton novel doesn't allow us to admire its heroine too easily. Alice is unlucky, but, like other bright people trying to live with integrity in a conformist society, she willfully brings trouble on herself, and Weaver makes her vain, haughty, a little scary, and also vulnerable. It's a fine performance, with shades of humor and ruefulness that are new to Weaver's accomplished work as a film actress. With David Strathairn as Alice's husband and Julianne Moore as her next-door neighbor. Screenplay by Peter Hedges and Polly Platt. Scott Elliott is the extremely competent first-time director.—*D.D.* (2/7/00) (Angelika Film Center.)

SEPTEMBER SONGS: THE MUSIC OF KURT WEILL (1995)

Everything about director Larry Weinstein's celebration of the music Kurt Weill wrote in prewar Germany and in forties New York gives off a sardonic sizzle, from the inventive pairings of singer and song to the inspired use of an industrial warehouse setting. The fifteen Weill songs, reinterpreted by the likes of William S. Burroughs and Nick Cave, largely duplicate the selection on the landmark 1985 tribute CD, "Lost in the Stars." But the new set of performers (only Lou Reed and bass player Charlie Haden repeat) and Weinstein's playful stagings conjure up plenty of charismatic angst and renew the songs once more. Teresa Stratas and Elvis Costello give finely tuned, idiosyncratic performances, and at times Weinstein displays both the versatility of the composer and the bite of his frequent collaborator, Bertolt Brecht. In "The Ballad of the Soldier's Wife" (sung by PJ Harvey), Weinstein uses symbolic changes of clothing to convey the song's impact more vividly than any direct appeal to the emotions would.—*Michael Sragow* (BAM Rose Cinemas; Feb. 17.)

SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER (1960)

This François Truffaut film is based on David Goodis's "Down There," a trim, well-written American crime novel. The movie busts out all over—and that's what's wonderful about it. Comedy, pathos, and tragedy are all scrambled up. Charlie, the sad-faced little piano player (Charles Aznavour), is the thinnest-skinned of modern heroes: each time he has cared about someone he has suffered, and now he just wants to be "out of it." This is a comedy about melancholia—perhaps the only comedy about melancholia. Truffaut is freely inventive here—a young director willing to try almost anything—and Charlie's encounters with the world are filled with good and bad jokes, bits from old Sacha Guitry films, clowns and thugs, tough kids, songs and fantasy and snow scenes, and homages to the American Grade B gangster pictures of the forties and fifties. Nothing is clear-cut; the ironies crisscross and bounce. In French.—*P.K.* (Film Forum; Feb. 26.)

SIMPATICO

For his first movie, the young British director Matthew Warchus has delivered an elusive and distinctly unthrilling thriller, based on a Sam Shepard play. Nick Nolte is a dishevelled bum named Vinnie; Jeff Bridges is Carter—horse breeder, smooth operator, and, once upon a time, Vinnie's best friend. A crime from their past resurfaces, and, under the pressure of its revelation, the two of them gradually trade places. It all feels too schematic for its own good, and Warchus is unable to shake the staginess out of the dialogue. Albert Finney in particular, as the fall guy for the half-forgotten crime, enjoys his own brusque seediness too much. This is a man's world, but what you remember are the women at its margins; there are fine performances from Catherine Keener as Vinnie's timid friend, and from Sharon Stone as Carter's neglected wife. The film has a dreamy, resigned air, caught between brightness and deep shadow, and these two look more at home in it than anyone else.—*A.L.* (1/14/00) (Murray Hill Cinemas and Village East Cinemas.)

THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY

For his first outing since "The English Patient," the writer and director Anthony Minghella has returned to the roasted light of Italy. The source is Patricia Highsmith's spooky, misanthropic novel of 1955; Matt Damon plays Tom Ripley, her murderous hero, although he lacks the quicksilver elusiveness that the role demands. He is

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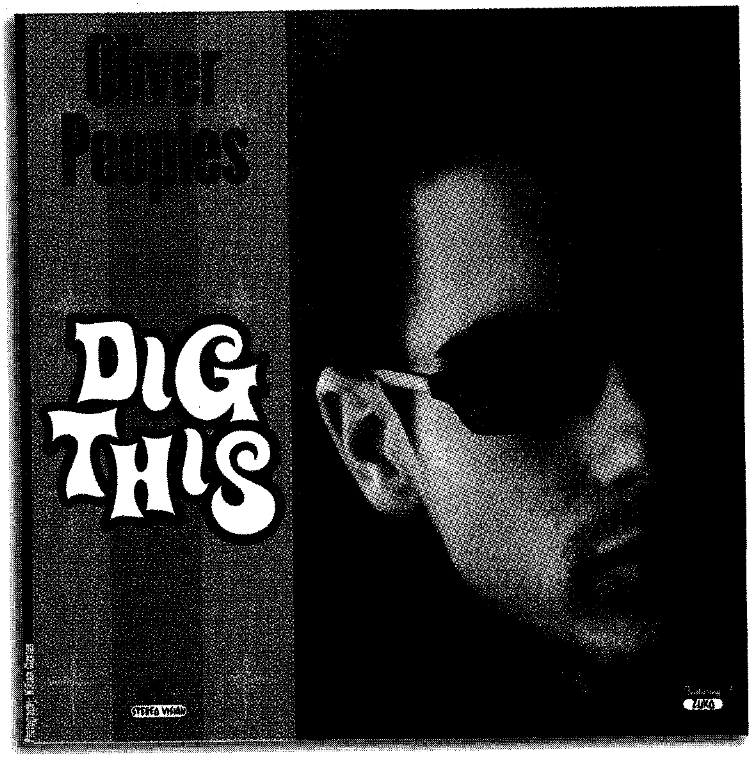

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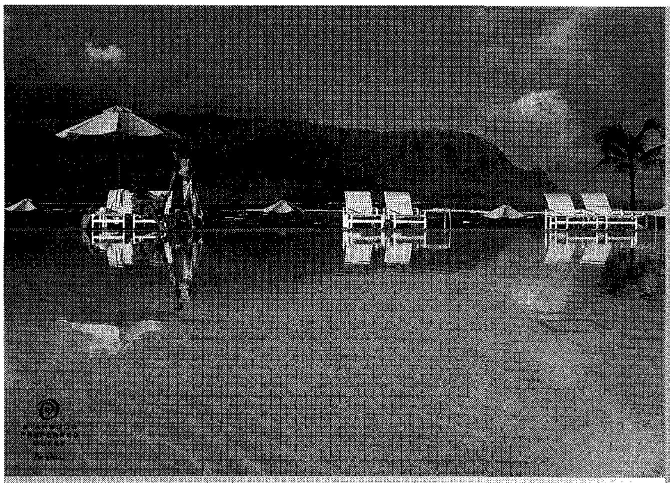

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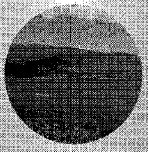

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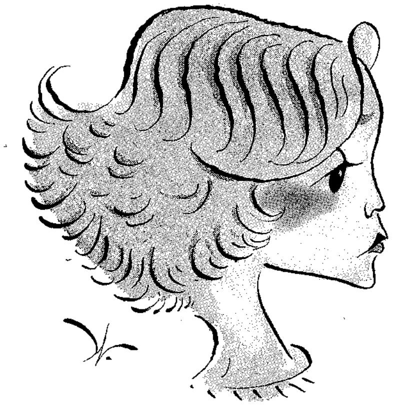

MICHAEL WITTE

INNOCENT BROAD

The comedienne Madeline Kahn, who died last December at the age of 57, was perhaps the most lovably cuckoo femme fatale since Judy Holliday. In Eric Mendelsohn's poetic vision of Long Island, "Judy Berlin," opening February 25, Kahn (in her last film performance) plays a chattering suburban housewife whose manic energy grinds her husband down. But she is more familiar as the implacable nymph of such bawdy Mel Brooks farces as "Blazing Saddles," "Young Frankenstein," and "History of the World: Part I." Kahn was a busty blonde whose baby voice could soar operatically into a plate-rattling shriek. Gwyneth may be our new Grace Kelly, but who will replace our dizzy, lewd funny girl?

outshone by Jude Law, whose violent disappearance, halfway through the picture, is a grievous wound. Law is sunny, slippery, and pansexual; he might have made a better Ripley himself. In the female roles, Gwyneth Paltrow struggles to find anything much in the stony Marge, whom Highsmith so loftily scorned; more rewarding is the dreamy Cate Blanchett as an heiress named Meredith Logue—a part invented by Minghella. Her fine features are like a flawless period detail in themselves. The film feels warm but unsettled, as if hinting at approaching storms; the score, too, flits from lugubrious to manic. With Philip Seymour Hoffman, perfectly cast once again, this time as another of Tom's victims.—*A.L.* (12/27/99-1/3/00) (East 85th Street, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, New York Twin, 19th Street East 6, Olympia I and II, and Village Theatre VII.)

TOPSY-TURVY
Mike Leigh's brilliant re-creation of the most famous partnership in the British theatre—the collaboration of W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan in the glory era of imperial rule. There are elements here of a traditional bio-pic—failure, triumph, intimations of immortality—but none of the stodginess and self-congratulation that usually plague the form. Sullivan (Allan Corduner), a libertine who nevertheless had serious pretensions as a composer, and Gilbert (Jim Broadbent), formal, irascible, and asexual, but a great theatrical pro, are so dissimilar in temperament that they can hardly bear each other's com-

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pany. Leigh suggests that the combination of sentimental languor and incisiveness produced the art of "The Mikado," whose preparation and first performance take up the second half of the movie. The authentic period stage lighting produces a glow on the painted faces; the fragile beauty of Sullivan's tunes is piercing when they are played, as they are here, at slower tempos than we are used to hearing. In all, one of the greatest movies about the theatre. With Lesley Manville, Timothy Spall, Ron Cook, and Wendy Nottingham.—*D.D.* (12/27/99-1/3/00) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Paris, and Village Theatre VII.)

ALSO PLAYING

ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER (11/22/99)
Angelika Film Center, BAM Rose Cinemas, Chelsea Cinemas, Eastside Playhouse, and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.

ANY GIVEN SUNDAY (1/10/00)
42nd Street E Walk and 72nd Street East.

BEING JOHN MALKOVITCH (10/29/99)
Kips Bay Theatres, 64th and 2nd, 62nd & Broadway, and Waverly.

THE BIG TEASE
Angelika Film Center.

THE CIDER HOUSE RULES (12/13/99)
Angelika Film Center, Chelsea Cinemas, Criterion Center, East 86th Street Cinemas, Gotham Cinema, Kips Bay Theatre, and Lincoln Square.

THE END OF THE AFFAIR (12/6/99)
BAM Rose Cinemas, Lincoln Square, Murray Hill Cinemas, 64th and 2nd, and Village Theatre VII.

GALAXY QUEST
Art Greenwich Twin, Chelsea Cinemas, First & 62nd Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Cinema 1 and 2, and Union Square.

ISN'T SHE GREAT (2/7/00)
Chelsea Cinemas, First & 62nd Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Murray Hill Cinemas, Park & 86th Street Cinemas, and Union Square.

NEXT FRIDAY
Astor Plaza, Chelsea Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, Orpheum VII, and Village East Cinemas.

SCREAM 3
84th Street Sixplex, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, and Sutton 1 and 2.

THEATRE ADDRESSES

Unless noted, call 777-FILM for show times.

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
Art Greenwich Twin, Greenwich Ave. at 12th St.
Astor Plaza, 44th St. at Broadway.
BAM Rose Cinemas, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-623-2770).
Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinema I, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema II, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema 3rd Avenue, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (924-3363).
Coronet Cinemas, Third Ave. at 59th St.
Criterion Center, Broadway at 44th St.
East 85th Street, First Ave. at 85th St.
East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Eastside Playhouse, Third Ave. at 55th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.
Film Forum, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
42nd Street E Walk, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.
Gotham Cinema, Third Ave. at 58th St.
Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St.
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
Metro Cinema 1 and 2, Broadway at 99th St.
Murray Hill Cinemas, 160 E. 34th St.
New York Twin, Second Ave. at 67th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Olympia I and II, Broadway at 107th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (688-3800).
Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 125 E. 86th St.
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
The Screening Room, 54 Varick St. (334-2100).
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
State, Broadway at 45th St.
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Waverly 1 and 2, Sixth Ave. at 3rd St.
Worldwide Cinemas, 50th St. between Eighth and Ninth Aves.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—The New York Film Critics Circle presents its choices for the best films of the 1990s. Feb. 19 at 2: "The Wind in the Willows" (1997, Terry Jones). ♦ Feb. 19 at 4: "Let Him Have It" (1991, Peter Medak). ♦ Feb. 20 at 2: "The Way We Laughed" (1998, Gianni Amelio; in Italian). ♦ "Twilight" (1998, Robert Benton). ♦ A retrospective of the animated films of Hayao Miyazaki. Feb. 21 at 2 and Feb. 27 at 12: "My Neighbor Totoro" (1988; in Japanese). ♦ Feb. 22 at 2 and Feb. 27 at 4:30: "Porco Rosso" (1992; in Japanese). ♦ Feb. 23 at 2 and Feb. 26 at 4: "Whisper of the Heart" (1995, Yoshifumi Kondo; in Japanese). ♦ Feb. 24 and Feb. 26 at 2: "Kiki's Delivery Service" (1989; in Japanese). ♦ Feb. 25 and Feb. 27 at 2: "Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds" (1984; in Japanese). ♦ Feb. 26-27 at 6:30: "Princess Mononoke" (1998).

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (505-5110)—Feb. 17 at 7, Feb. 19 at 2, and Feb. 20 at 7: "Mystery Train" (1989, Jim Jarmusch). ♦ Feb. 17 at 9:30, Feb. 19 at 7, and Feb. 20 at 4:30: "Night on Earth" (1991, Jarmusch). ♦ Feb. 18 at 7, Feb. 19 at 9:30, and Feb. 20 at 2: "Dead Man" (1995, Jarmusch). ♦ Feb. 18 at 8:30 and Feb. 19 at 8: "Paradise Not Yet Lost" (1979, Jonas Mekas). ♦ Feb. 18 at 9:30, Feb. 19 at 4:30, and Feb. 20 at 9:30: "Blue in the Face" (1994, Wayne Wang and Paul Auster). ♦ Feb. 20 at 7: "Birth of a Nation" (1963; Mekas). ♦ Feb. 20 at 9: "Phantom of the Opera" (1925, Rupert Julian). ♦ Feb. 22 at 7: "The Forgotten" (1950, Luis Buñuel; in Spanish). ♦ Feb. 23 at 7: "Red Rain" (1998, Laura Plotkin). ♦ Feb. 23 at 8: "All the Rage" (1998; Roland Tec). ♦ Feb. 24 at 8:30: "La Jetée" (1964, Chris Marker; in French) and "Le Sang d'un Poète" (1930, Jean Cocteau; in French). ♦ Feb. 25 at 8, Feb. 26 at 6, and Feb. 27 at 4: "La Belle et la Bête" (1946, Cocteau; in French). ♦ Feb. 26 at 10: "Orphée" (1950, Cocteau; in French). ♦ Feb. 27 at 8: "La Testament d'Orphée" (1959, Cocteau; in French).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-623-2770)—Through Feb. 20: The Kurt Weill film festival. Feb. 16 at 7 and 9:30: "Why Change Your Wife?" (1920, Cecil B. De Mille). ♦ Feb. 17 at 4, 7, and 9:30: "September Songs: The Music of Kurt Weill" (†). ♦ Feb. 18 at 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "Where Do We Go From Here?" (1945, Gregory Ratoff). ♦ Feb. 19 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "The Threepenny Opera" (1931, Georg W. Pabst). ♦ Feb. 20 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "You and Me" (1938, Fritz Lang; in German).

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110)—Through April 6: The "Neo-Noir" film festival. Feb. 18-20: "Experiment in Terror" (1962, Blake Edwards) and "Cape Fear" (1962, J. Lee Thompson). ♦ Feb. 21-22: "The Manchurian Candidate" (1962, John Frankenheimer) and "The Parallax View" (1974, Alan J. Pakula). ♦ Feb. 23: "Night Moves" (1975, Arthur Penn) and "Mickey One" (1965, Penn). ♦ Feb. 24: "Shoot the Piano Player" (†) and "Pickpocket" (1959, Robert Bresson; in French). ♦ Feb. 25: "Taxi Driver" (1976, Martin Scorsese) and "Light Sleeper" (1992, Paul Schrader). ♦ Feb. 26: "Blue Velvet" (†). ♦ Feb. 27: "Lost Highway" (1997, Lynch). ♦ Feb. 28-29: "Badlands" (1973; Terrence Malick) and "True Romance" (1993, Tony Scott).

FLORENCE GOULD HALL
55 E. 59th St. (355-6160)—Feb. 22 at 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, and 9: "La Cérémonie" (1996, Claude Chabrol; in French). ♦ Feb. 29 at 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, and 9: "Mauvais Sang" (1987, Léos Carax; in French).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—Through Feb. 24: "The American Place: Landscape in the Early Western (and a Few Later Classics)." Feb. 17 at 6 and Feb. 24 at 3: "Sky High" (1922, Lynn Reynolds). ♦ Feb. 18 at 2:30: "Blazing the Trail" (1912, Thomas H. Ince) and "The Searchers" (1956, John Ford). ♦ Feb. 18 at 6:30 and Feb. 20 at 2: "The Chief's Daughter" (1911, D. W. Griffith) and "Blazing Saddles" (1974, Mel Brooks). ♦ Feb. 19 at 2: "The Everlasting Triangle" (1914, John H. Collins) and "The Wind" (1928, Victor Seastrom). ♦ Feb. 19 at 5: "The Sheriff's Baby" (1913, Griffith) and "3 Bad Men" (1926, Ford). ♦ Through March 7: A tribute to the C.N.C. French Film Archives. Feb. 24 at 2:30 and Feb. 29 at 6: "Those at Our House" (1915, Sacha Guitry; silent) and "Studies of Paris" (1929, André Sauvage; silent). ♦ Feb. 24 at 6 and Feb. 27 at 2: "Falbalas" (1944, Jacques Becker; in French). ♦ Feb. 25 at 2:30 and Feb. 26 at 5: "Maldone" (1927, Jean Grémillon; with French intertitles). ♦ Feb. 25 at 6:30 and Feb. 28 at 2:30: "Land of the Bulls" (1924, Musidora; with French intertitles) and "He Left on a Long Trip" (1932, Germaine Krull and Georges H. Patin; in French). ♦ Feb. 26 at 2 and Feb. 28 at 6: "The Wife of Monte Cristo" (1946, Edgar G. Ulmer). ♦ Feb. 27 at 5 and Feb. 29 at 2:30: "Somewhere, Someone" (1972, Yannick Bellon; in French). ♦ Feb. 26-27: Screenings of the Academy Award-nominated films in the categories of Animated Short, Documentary Short, and Live-Action Short. ♦ Through April: "From Automatic Vaudeville to the Seventh Art: Cinema's Silent Years, 1893-1928," selections from the museum's silent-film collection.

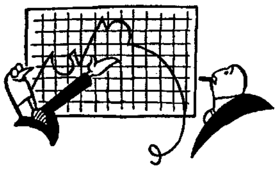
THE SCREENING ROOM
54 Varick St. (334-2100)—The films of director John Frankenheimer. Feb. 16 at 3:30 and 8: "The Iceman Cometh" (1973). ♦ Feb. 17 at 3 and 7:50: "Black Sunday" (1977). ♦ Feb. 17 at 5:30 and 10:20: "Ronin" (1998). ♦ Feb. 25-March 2: A retrospective of the "Planet of the Apes" films.

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (875-5600)—Through Feb. 24: "Frederick Wiseman: American Filmmaker." Feb. 16 at 1: "Ballet" (1995). ♦ Feb. 17 at 1 and 5:45 and Feb. 18 at 3:25: "Missile" (1987). ♦ Feb. 17 at 3:15 and 8 and Feb. 18 at 1: "Sinai Field Mission" (1978). ♦ Feb. 18 at 5:40 and 8:50: "Welfare" (1975). ♦ Feb. 21 at 1 and 6:15: "Primate" (1974). ♦ Feb. 21 at 3 and 8:20: "Canal Zone" (1977). ♦ Feb. 22 at 1 and 6: "Meat" (1976). ♦ Feb. 22 at 3:15 and 8:15: "Adjustment and Work" (1986). ♦ Feb. 23 at 1: "Multi-Handicapped" (1986). ♦ Feb. 23 at 3:20 and 8:45 and Feb. 24 at 6:15: "Deaf" (1986). ♦ Feb. 24 at 1: "Model" (1980). ♦ Feb. 24 at 3:30: "Aspen" (1991). ♦ The silent film "Der Golem" (1920, Paul Wegener; with German intertitles) will be screened with live accompaniment by the Arditti String Quartet and clarinettist David Krakauer on Feb. 19 at 8 and Feb. 20 at 2 and 8.

THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

WALL STREET FOLLIES
A BEAR MOST FEROCIOUS

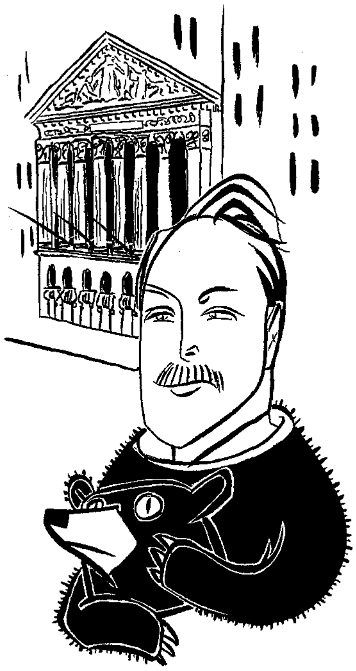


In the midst of the longest bull market in our country's history, one of its most influential participants has turned out to be a bear named David Tice. On the financial-news cable networks, where he is frequently asked to comment on the markets, Tice, with sandy hair, a mustache, and a big frame squeezed into a conservative dark suit, looks like a cross between a Texas wildcatter and a Wall Street banker. He is in demand these days because a report he puts out, *Behind the Numbers*, has driven down the stock prices of some of the companies it critiques. In Dallas, Tice runs a mutual fund called the Prudent Bear Fund, and many of his clients are short-sellers—that is, they bet that stock prices will go down, and they profit (when they do profit) by selling borrowed stock at a high price and buying it back at a lower one.

"I'm a maverick by nature," Tice told me, "but I'm not crazy. I may wear button-down shirts and navy-blue suits, but I am an independent thinker. Let's put it this way: I don't believe J.F.K. was assassinated by a lone gunman."

Unsurprisingly, given the boom, the Prudent Bear Fund was among the worst-performing funds last year. When Tice launched the fund, in 1996, the Dow was just over 5,000 (it recently topped 11,000), and the fund has lost money every year. On being asked what it felt like to be a bear in such a context, Tice replied, "It's uncomfortable. It would be more fun if I hadn't been so bearish as early as I was." Still, he believes that, despite the market run-up, his reasoning has been sound. "This is an asset bubble fuelled by excessive credit creation," he says. "It's fuelled on the backs of American families and corporations that are leveraging up like never before. This party should have been over a long time ago."

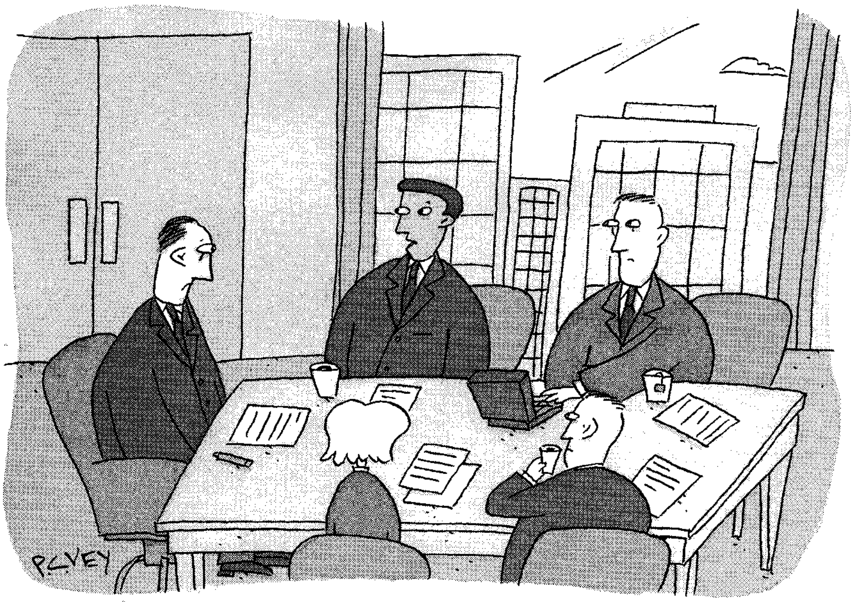
Last October, Tice tried to stop the party, or so his critics charge. In *Behind the Numbers*, he launched a broadside against Tyco International Ltd., a diversified conglomerate, based in New Hampshire, that most Wall Street analysts consider one of America's best-managed companies. Its stock has rewarded investors handsomely over the years, easily outpacing the major index averages. Tice, however, charged that the company was engaging in misleading accounting. The stock price dropped twenty-five per cent that month, and it fell further in December, when the Securities and Exchange Commission launched an informal inquiry.


David Tice

In November, Tice turned his sights on Lucent Technologies, one of the most widely held telecommunications stocks and a Wall Street darling. Again, many investors became skittish, and on January 6th Lucent issued an earnings warning. Since then, share prices have fallen by nearly a third. On January 14th, amid rumors that Tice's next target would be the technology giant Cisco Systems, Inc., Cisco's stock fell three points in a single day. So far, none of Tice's allegations about Tyco or Lucent have panned out. (Tice never actually issued any comments on Cisco, and says that he has no immediate plans to do so; last week, the company's stock reached an all-time high.) Yet rumors about companies that he may or may not be targeting have continued to roil stock prices.

Obviously, the Prudent Bear Fund and its short-selling clients have an interest in seeing the prices of stocks de-

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL



"Well, J.B., we're not a successful Internet company because we're not an Internet company."

• •

cline. James J. Cramer, another influential money manager, says that he respects Tice's market theories but is skeptical about the way he "makes himself right." Referring to the Tyco charges, Cramer said, "Can you just generate an S.E.C. investigation and then short the stock?" (As it happens, the S.E.C. is now looking into trading by some of Tice's research clients. Tice told me that the Prudent Bear Fund did not take a short position in Tyco either before or after he took his shots at it.)

In any event, it's clear that Tice's extraordinary influence on the market stems less from his theorizing than from his marksmanship. *Behind the Numbers*, his hit list, has become so powerful that some two hundred institutional investors have taken out subscriptions, at ten thousand dollars apiece.

Naturally, all this enrages Tice's victims. Tyco has gone to elaborate lengths to rebut Tice's allegations, yet, even after recent earnings surpassed expectations, its stock price remains far below earlier levels. Now the company is talking about suing Tice. "We felt *so* violated," Tyco's chairman, L. Dennis Kozlowski, said recently. "You're chasing ghosts. You're trying to disprove a negative."

Tice is not without defenders, and a number of newspaper columnists and financial commentators have praised his efforts to spotlight misleading accounting practices in the marketplace. For that matter, Tice can't take all the credit for the havoc he has wrought. Richard L. Hanley, a Tice client who runs an investment partnership on Park Avenue, says that he has made money by shorting stocks targeted by Tice. "In this high-multiple universe, most of these stocks are very vulnerable," he said. "They're like one-legged tables. There's no support. You kick the leg of earnings or earnings potential, and the sell-off may be significant." Still, Hanley questions the current reaction to the mere mention of Tice's name. In today's emotional market, he said, "Everything is exaggerated. The crowd is insane."

—James B. Stewart

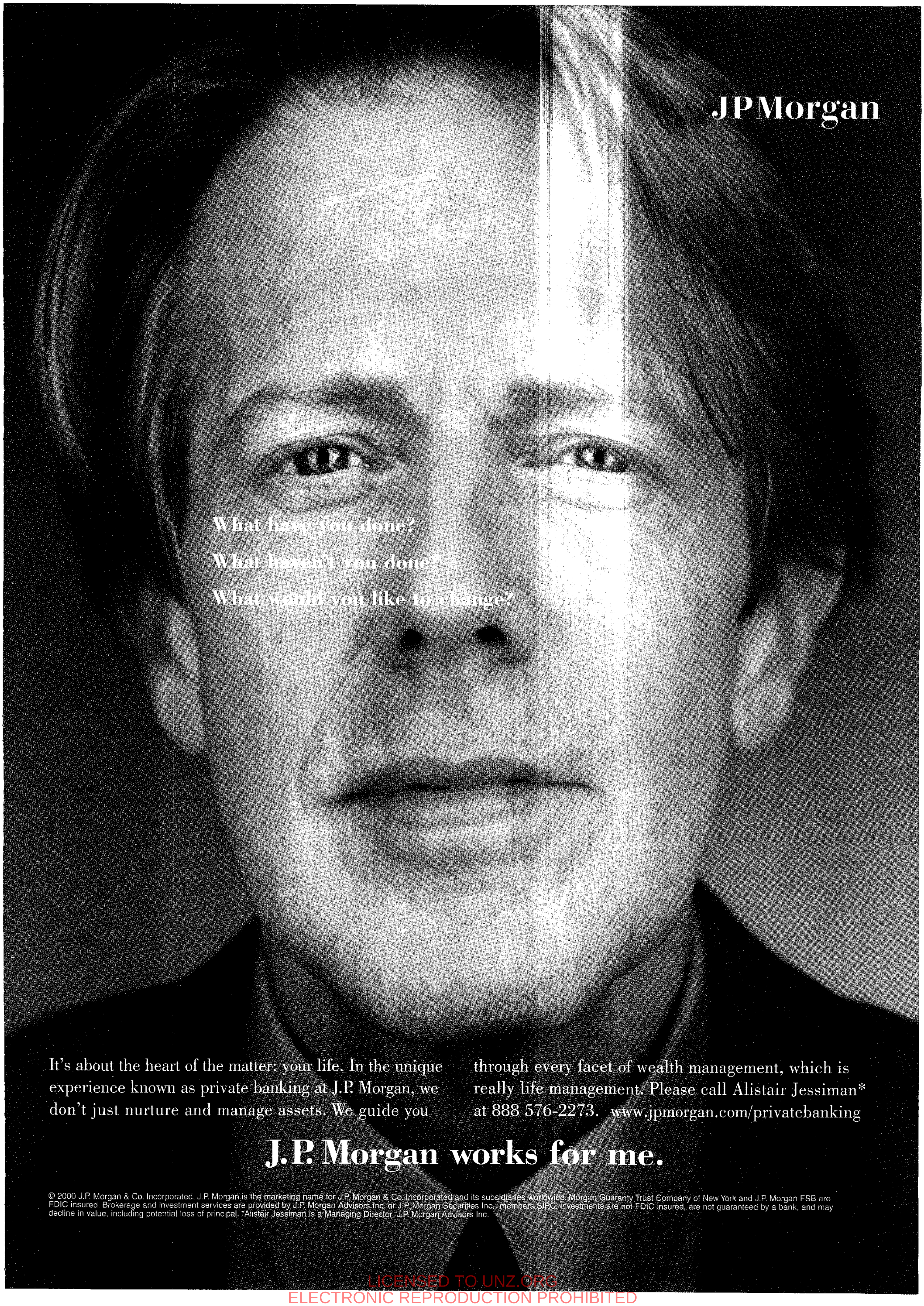
INK

THE BOOK TO HAVE WHEN THE KILLER BEES ARRIVE

Here's the situation: Your enemies have used their car to block the road ahead of you, and a bear, a python, and a mountain lion are gaining on you from behind. To your right: quicksand. To your left: a body of shark-infested water. Meanwhile, a woman is giving birth in your back seat, and the woman is unable to breathe, and you have a bullet lodged in your leg, and a package lying on the seat beside you looks as though it might contain a bomb. What do you do?

Answering that question is much easier today than it was just a little while ago: all you have to do is open your copy of "The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook," by Joshua Piven and David Borgenicht, and consult pages 34, 50, 44, 54, 18, 46, 99, 88, 109, and 94, respectively. The book, which was published late last year by Chronicle Books, has a bright-orange cover and is small enough to be tucked under the strap of a life jacket or a parachute pack. It contains straightforward, step-by-step, illustrated instructions for extricating yourself and others from all kinds of terrible predicaments. To fend off sharks, for example, you want to use "anything you have in your possession" to make "quick, sharp, repeated jabs" on or near the sharks' eyes or gills—not on the tips of the sharks' noses, as so many people erroneously assume. The book also explains how to jump from a building into a Dumpster, how to escape from killer bees (forget about swimming pools—the bees will wait for you to resurface), and how to win a sword fight.

Piven and Borgenicht ought to have been longtime friends by now—they have lived in Philadelphia much of their lives and have many acquaintances in common; they both graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in the early nineties; and they are both writers—but they didn't meet until just over a year ago, when Borgenicht, after wondering one evening how to land a pilotless airplane, went looking for a like-minded writing partner. Their book was inspired, Piven says, by "paranoia and too much television," and also by certain formative life events. Piven was once attacked by knife-wielding thugs while riding a motorcycle in Jamaica—an incident that led him to wonder about the proper technique for leaping from a moving motorcycle to a moving car. (See page 84.) Borgenicht, whose previous works include "Mom Always Said, 'Don't Play Ball in the House,' and Other Stuff We Learned from TV," first began to worry about quicksand as a child, while watch-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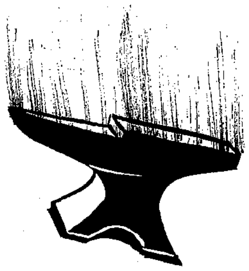
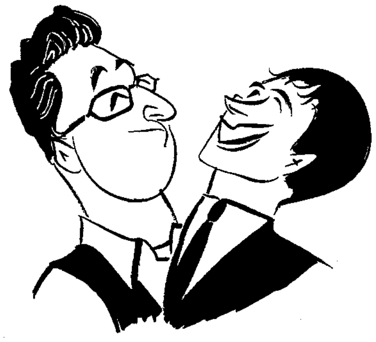
ing Tarzan movies and certain episodes of "Gilligan's Island." ("Tarzan was usually rescued by Cheetah," he says. "We stress self-reliance in our book—leave the chimpanzee at home.") Still, the authors' advice is drawn not from their own experiences but from the accumulated wisdom of experts in various disaster-related fields. The instructions for landing a plane, for example, come from two accomplished aviators, one of whom once wrote a book called "How to Crash a Plane (and Survive!)."

"The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook" has apparently tapped a deep lode of apprehension in American society; it is now in its sixth printing. "The last time I checked Amazon," Borgenicht says, "we were ahead of 'Angela's Ashes,' "—a book that managed to become a nationwide best-seller despite its silence on the subject of how to survive if your parachute fails. (See page 137.)





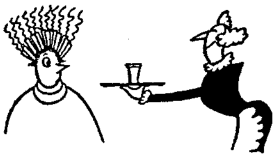
David Borgenicht and Joshua Piven

A curious fact about "The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook" is that it tends to increase rather than to allay a reader's irrational anxieties. Even to someone who has no contact whatsoever with stampeding bulls, the knowledge that bulls "are not like horses, and will not avoid you if you lie down" is unsettling. And the advice about "how to maneuver on top of a moving train and get inside," though thoroughly persuasive, raises a disturbing question: how did you get up there in the first place?

—*David Owen*

GLORIOUS MOSAIC DEPT.

YOUNG JAPANESE IN BLACKFACE INVADE DOWNTOWN



The Pink Tea Cup, the great black-owned-and-operated soul-food restaurant in the West Village, is known to people all over the world who have a hankering for down-home cooking, and even to those who don't exactly know what down-home cooking is. On a recent busy Saturday, the Pink, as it's called by its regulars, was visited by a group of six young Japanese patrons who, it was clear, had no idea what chicken wings smothered in brown gravy, cheese grits, and bread pudding were, but were more than willing to give them a try.

A waitress came over to the table of Japanese and plunked down small plates of bread pudding. The diners pushed and prodded at the quivery dessert for a while before one pretty young woman, who wore dreadlocks, purple nail polish, and a nose ring, decided to dive in. After tasting a spoonful, she smiled and said, "Ah! Ah!" Her friends enthusiastically followed suit, like explorers who had discovered a new world. They were dressed for their version of it.

Sitting next to the young woman with dreadlocks was a young man who wore his hair in an Afro. On her other side was a larger man with a diamond pinkie ring and cornrows. All six of the young Japanese had dark tans, and several of them wore a deep-brown makeup base that made their faces look darker than those of any of the Pink Tea Cup's black patrons that afternoon.

Japanese hip-hop kids have been spotted all around downtown lately. Carmen Grau, who is the manager of Bar Odeon, says, "Sometimes those new Japanese kids come in here, and I'm like, Wait a minute. Their Afros are bigger than mine!" Sue Kwon, a Korean-American photographer who shoots black hip-hop stars for magazines such as *The Source*, says, "At first, I thought it was racist, horrible. Then, when I went to Japan, I got over it. That suntan thing? It's not minstrel time to them. It's an homage thing. They really want to be what they think America is, which is hip-hop culture."

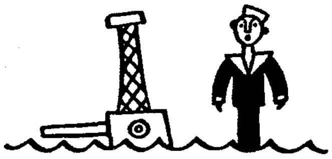
Mami Shirakawa, a young Japanese woman who is the host of "Rap City Japan," a program on Black Entertainment Television, has been a close observer of what she calls "the whole East-meets-West thing." "Japanese people are good at structure. We see the outside first," she said the other day outside Ssur Inc., a boutique on Mulberry Street. "In the mid-nineteen-eighties, the movie 'Wild Style' was very popular in Japan. Kids had never seen dreadlocks, cornrows, Afros before. After that, there was more suntanning, more tanning salons." Shirakawa lives in the East Village, not far from what she calls "the new Little Tokyo," on Ninth Street. She says that a number of Japanese pigeonheads (hip-hop and trip-hop fans) live in her neighborhood. "In Japan now, there are some girls called *ko gyal*"—"*gyal*" is meant to approximate a Jamaican pronunciation of "girl"—"who put dark base on and then white circles around their eyes, like pandas. In Tokyo, there are many places to get dreadlocked hair, or an Afro. We have arcades that have hip-hop dancing games: You put your feet on a mat and try to follow the steps. If you mess up, you lose. There are also 'scratching machine' games. You have to scratch like a d.j. If you don't scratch hard enough, you lose."

Just then, Jun, a shop assistant at Ssur, came back from a cigarette break. Jun is Japanese. Her hair was tied up in a bandanna, with tightly curled tendrils peeking out of the top. When she was asked where she got her hair permed, she answered, "I always have curly hair. When I was a baby, I had a little natural Afro."

—*Hilton Als*

DEPT. OF SURVIVORS

FORMER ENEMIES MEET IN MEMORY OF FOUR MARTYRS



At breakfast the other day, in a Washington hotel, Kurt Röser was reminiscing about his life in the German Navy during the Second World War, and especially about the night of February 3, 1943, when his submarine

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sank an American troop-transport ship, the Dorchester, off the coast of Greenland. Six hundred and seventy-seven of the nine hundred and two men on board were killed. Among the American dead were four Army chaplains—a Methodist, a Dutch Reformed, a Catholic, and a Jew—who gave their life jackets to others, then joined hands and, praying aloud, went down with the ship. At the time, of course, Kurt Röser and his U-boat mates had no idea of this scene of martyrdom. As soon as their torpedo detonated against the American ship, the Germans fled, and before long the pinging of sonar from a Coast Guard cutter told them that they were being pursued. Depth charges began exploding around them. "We were full of fear," Röser recalled. Then, nodding at a white-bearded man who was seated beside him at the breakfast table, he said, "I can't believe that such a sympathetic, kindly man would ever have wanted to kill me."

"I feel the same about Kurt," the man with the beard said. He was Dick Swanson, of Mead, Nebraska, and on the night the Dorchester sank he was the sonar operator on the Coast Guard cutter Comanche, which had hunted Röser's U-boat. Looking back, Swanson found it hard to comprehend that his ship had been sent after the Germans when there was still an opportunity to save Americans from the freezing North Atlantic. The Comanche did ultimately pick up several lifeboats from the Dorchester, rescuing a total of ninety-three men. But what stuck most stubbornly in Swanson's memory of the night was the image of the red lights that were affixed to the life jackets of the men in the water. "We steamed through acres of those little red lights, just acres of them, bobbing," he said. "That meant those men were alive when they hit the water, because you had to turn those lights on manually. Now they were all dead, and the guys on our deck were all muttering, 'The bastards,' meaning the Germans." Swanson nodded at Röser. "Meaning this guy here."

Röser smiled, and Swanson, who is seventy-seven, said, "It's a feeling of relief that at last we've met." They had been brought together, along with three survivors of the Dorchester, and one of Röser's U-boat comrades, by David Fox, the nephew of the Methodist chaplain who gave his life on the Dorchester, and the executive director of the Immortal Chaplains Foundation, in Minneapolis, whose motto is "If we can die together, can't we live together?"

One of the Dorchester's survivors, Ben Epstein, said that when Fox first proposed a "reconciliation" weekend with the crew of the German U-boat, he could not accept the idea. But when he met Röser, and his comrade, Gerhard Buske, he found them to be "very warm." He also learned that Buske and Röser knew what it was like to lose one's shipmates; a year after torpedoing the Dorchester, their own submarine was sunk by four British destroyers. Both men had spent the rest of the war as prisoners. Röser was sent to Mississippi, where he was put to work sandbagging the levee against flooding and picking cotton; and Buske settled into an officers' camp in Canada, where he played the trombone in a Glenn Miller-style band.

During their trip to Washington, the German and American veterans visited the Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Ben Epstein said the Germans "were very affected," sobbing openly. They also

TWO MENUS

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♥ Heartwise!

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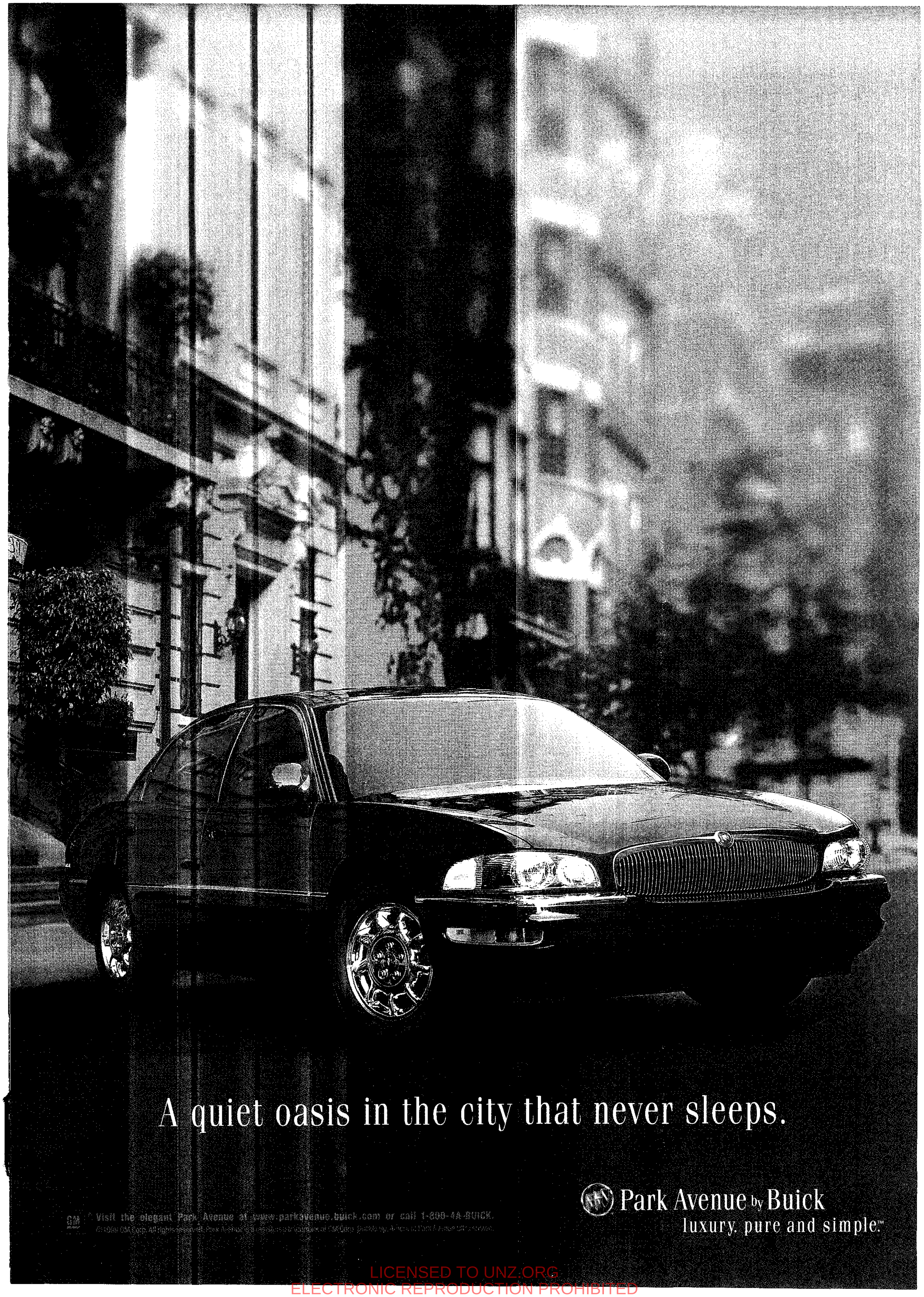
—*Steve Martin*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paid a joint visit to Theresa Goode Kaplan, the eighty-eight-year-old widow of the Dorchester's Jewish chaplain, at her home in Chevy Chase. She shook the Germans' hands, and accepted their expressions of respect for her husband and for her suffering. When the room was silent, Gerhard Buske produced a harmonica, raised his hands to his mouth, and blew out a slow, warbling rendition of "Amazing Grace." Everyone clapped. Then the room lapsed back into silence.

—*Philip Gourevitch*

AT THE GALLERIES
A PUBLISHER DONS A WELDER'S MASK

Arthur Carter, the publisher of the New York *Observer*, was dabbing his gently glistening chin with a handkerchief as he stood in the lobby of the Salander-O'Reilly gallery. In front of him loomed ten feet of jutting, angular brushed stainless steel, similarly glistening—a Carter original, which until recently had stood in the field adjacent to his home in Roxbury, Connecticut, and now had been shipped to Manhattan to take pride of place in his début art show, which opened earlier this month. "I'm very nervous," said Carter, who has been making sculptures for the past four or five years. His work tends to be composed of big swooping loops or massive blocks in bronze and stainless steel, buffed to a razzle-dazzle golden or silvery gleam, as if they were were fixtures in a Christmas window at Henri Bendel. "You never know how your work is going to be received," he said.

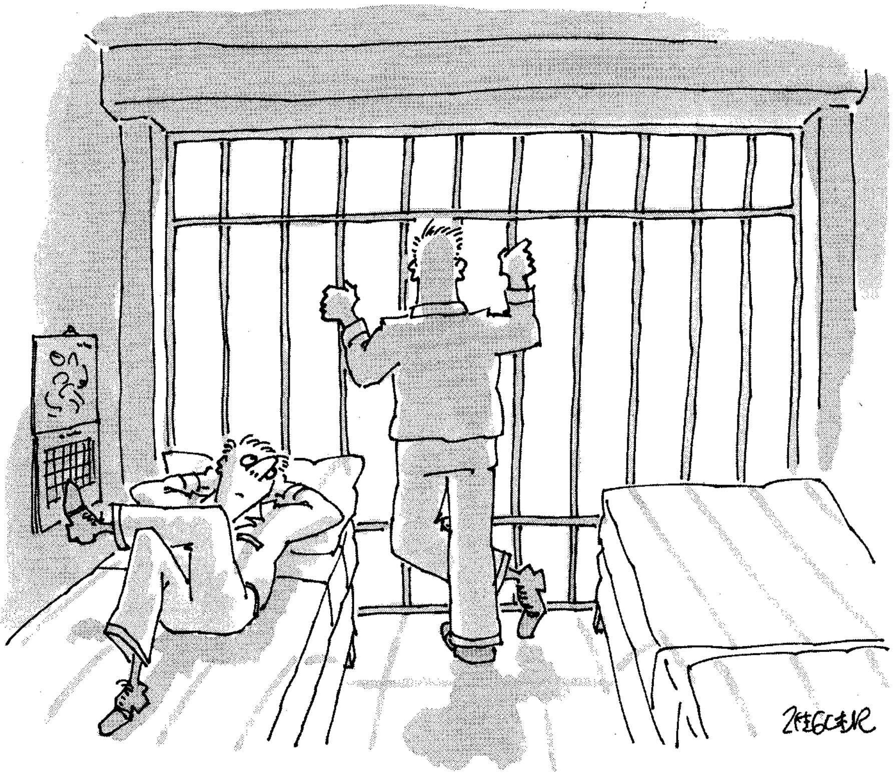
Actually, you have a pretty good idea of how your work is going to be received if you are Arthur Carter and it is the opening night of your début show, because you pack the room with your friends and employees—some of whom have known you since you were an investment banker, in the sixties, or even before then, when you were training to be a concert pianist—and you stick glasses of wine into their hands and wait for them to come up and congratulate you and make jokes about giving up your day job. Such friends included Jules Kroll, who approached Carter, pumped his hand, and told him he especially liked a work called "Elliptyk," which consisted of a seven-foot-tall series of interconnected brushed-bronze hoops rising like bubbles from the ground. "You're going to make a living from them, Arthur!" he said. Erica Jong was there with her daughter, Molly, and so was Jack Rosenthal, of the *Times*, and Victor Navasky, of *The Nation*, and Roger Kimball, of *The New Criterion*, and a whole posse from the *Observer*. The lawyer Martin Garbus grabbed Carter's face and smackingly kissed his cheek. "*Mazel tov!*" he said, and Carter started to look a little less apprehensive.

Carter's wife, Linda, said that in twenty-three years of marriage she has never seen her husband as involved with anything as he is now with his art works. "This is gripping him in a very core way," said Mrs. Carter, who is a psychologist. "I think it combines all his former careers—his music, his interest in graphic design, his fascination for mathematics, his interest in contemporary society." When asked where his mergers-and-acquisitions period fit in, Mrs. Carter waved her hand over her shoulder as if to indicate something that had been tossed out of the window long ago. "The merging of ellipses has taken over from the mergers and acquisitions," she said.

Carter, who works in a studio in Roxbury with two full-time assistants, said that he had been influenced by Kandinsky. "Whimsy is very important to me," he went on. "And the aesthetics, and old-fashioned beauty. There's a truth to it. You know the famous truth-and-beauty statement?" All of the works are made in editions of three, and are available for seventy-five thousand dollars apiece. So far, Carter's collectors have included the developer Jerry Speyer, who put a Carter in the lobby of 1301 Avenue of the Americas. The publisher-sculptor is making another piece, for 90 Park Avenue, and is also doing a larger version of the towering "Elliptyk," for the restaurant Daniel.

As the evening wore on and yet more friends turned out to wish him well, Carter became palpably more at ease. When he was asked whether he was planning to make reduced-size versions of his sculptures, he smiled loftily. "No," he said. "I'm not interested in small ones."

—*Rebecca Mead*



"End of February, McIntosh. Time to think about our spring plantings."

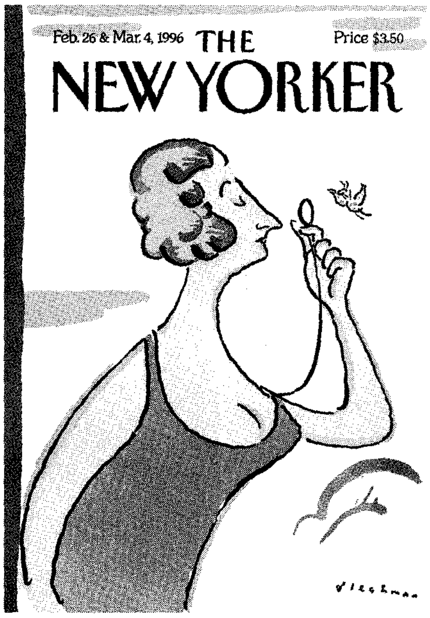
PORTFOLIO

COVER STORY

In many ways, the first issue of *The New Yorker*, with the cover date February 21, 1925, was but a seed of the thing to come, a whimsical artifact of its Jazz Age moment. And yet Rea Irvin's portrait of Eustace Tilley—a top-hatted Regency dandy, with his chest puffed, his gimlet eye gazing through a monocle at a pale-pink butterfly—hit its mark precisely. The cover had everything: the artist's assured elegance, a connection to the times, a gentle barb (aimed, in this case, at the city's fossilized high society), and, perhaps, self-mockery (aimed at the fledgling magazine's own ambitions). The image so effectively established *The New Yorker's* look and spirit that it was published, unchanged, every February for nearly seventy years. And, as you can see on the four pages that follow, that spirit, a New York spirit, takes in everything from the decorative to the political, from Constantin Aladjalov's witty effervescence to Charles Addams's uncanny gloom.

More recently, Eustace has been refracted back through his own monocle. He has made appearances as a low-life punk on Times Square and, at long last, as a woman. And now, snout cocked, ears hanging over his starched collar, he comes along . . . as a dog. Not just any dog, of course, but a sleek, aristocratic weimaraner. The photographer William Wegman (employing his loyal Chip, a cardboard cut-out of Eustace's topcoat, and an enormous Polaroid) has given us, as an anniversary present, a canine Eustace who assumes the dandy's stance with sang-froid, batting an eyelash only when the butterfly lands on his nose.

—*Françoise Mouly*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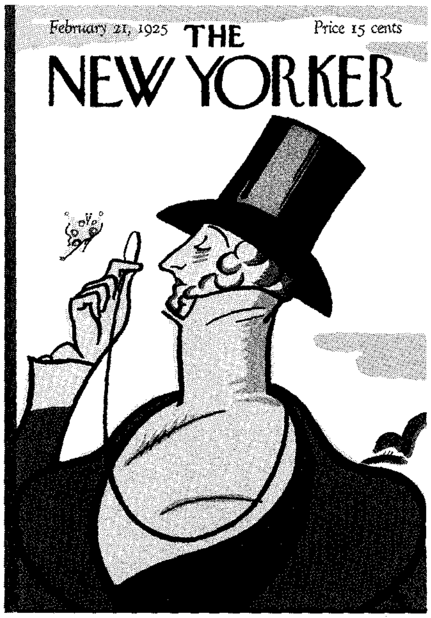
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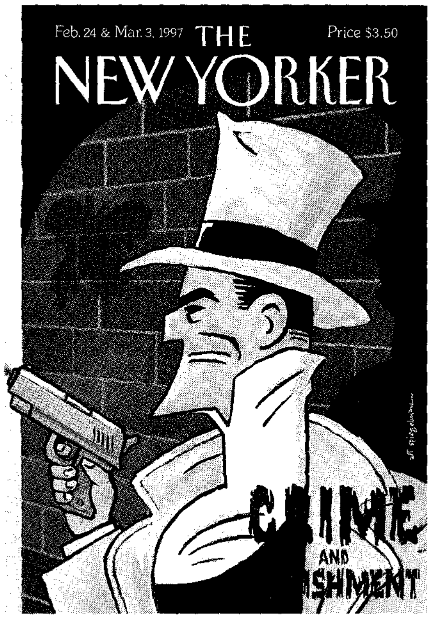
REA IRVIN, FEBRUARY 21, 1925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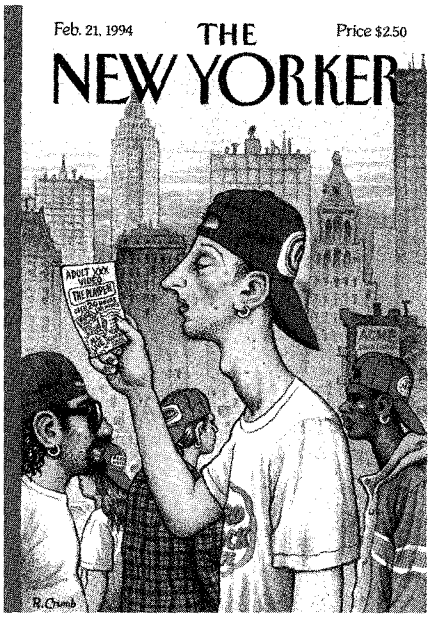
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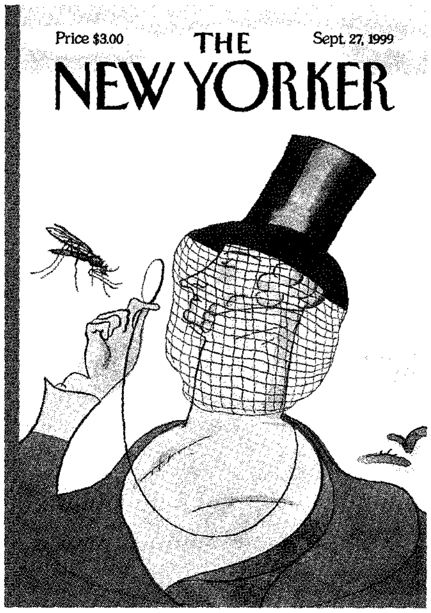
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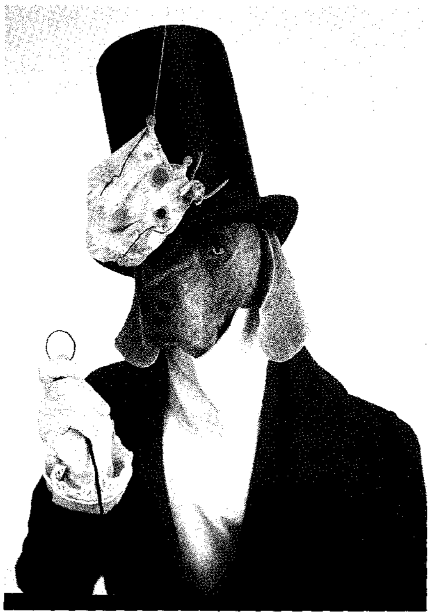
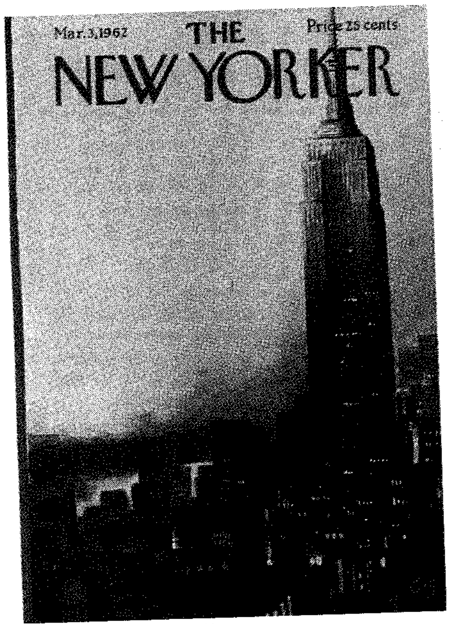


WILLIAM WEGMAN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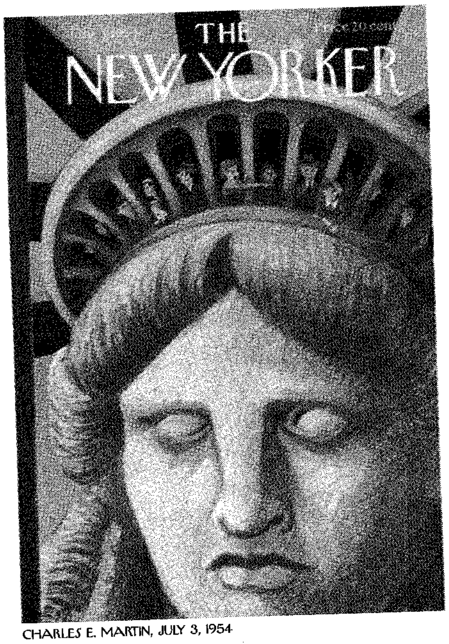
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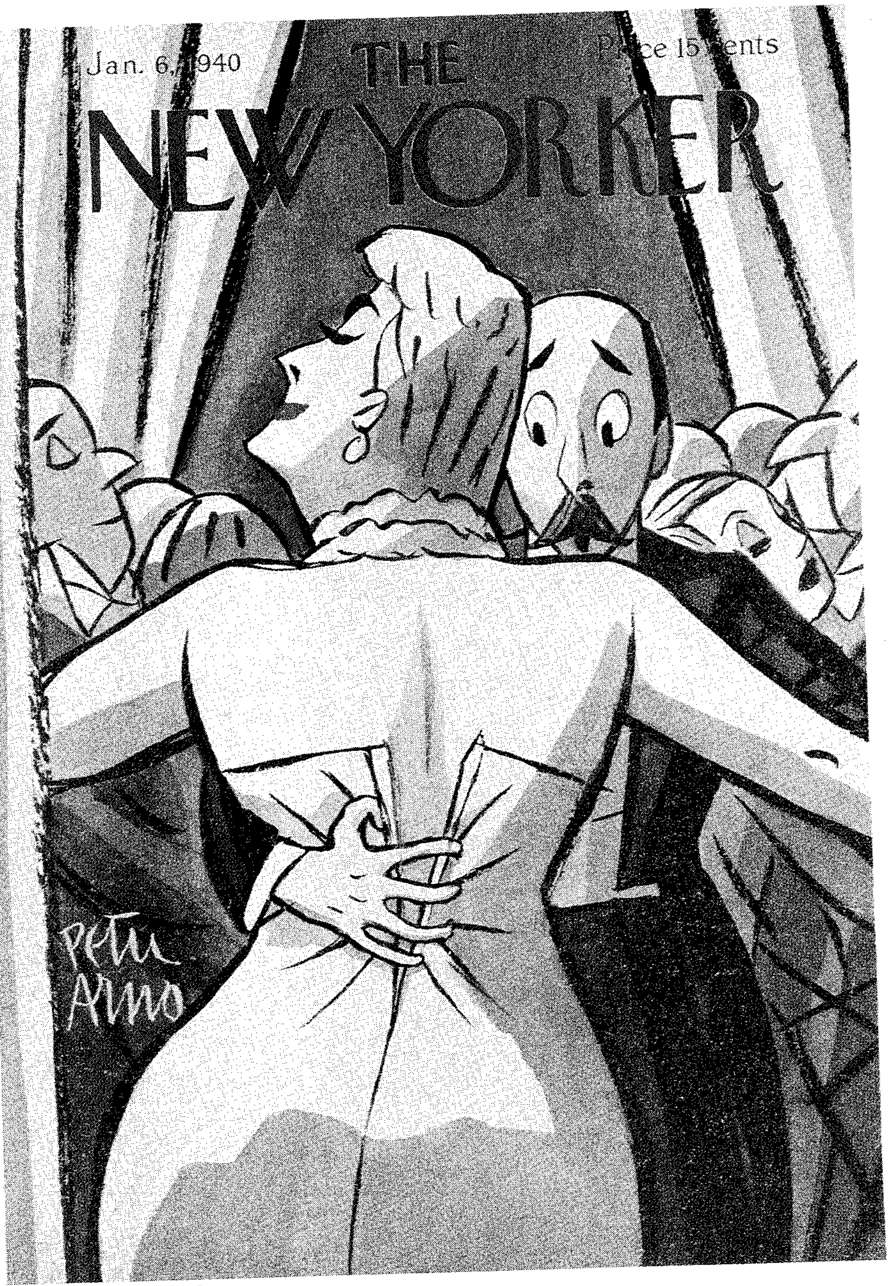
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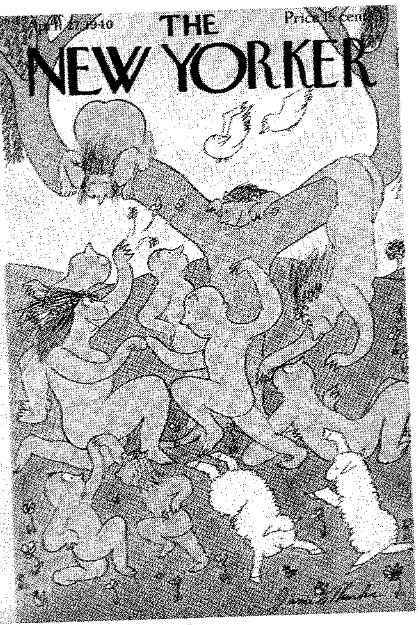
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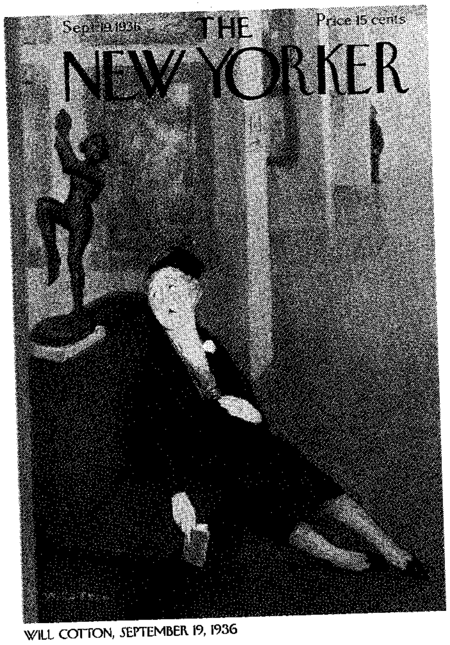
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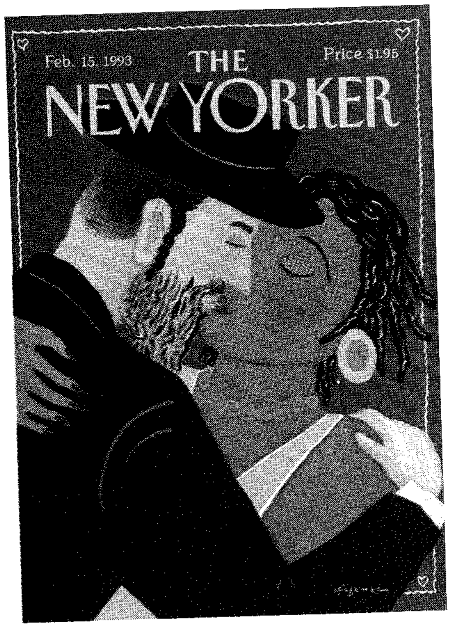
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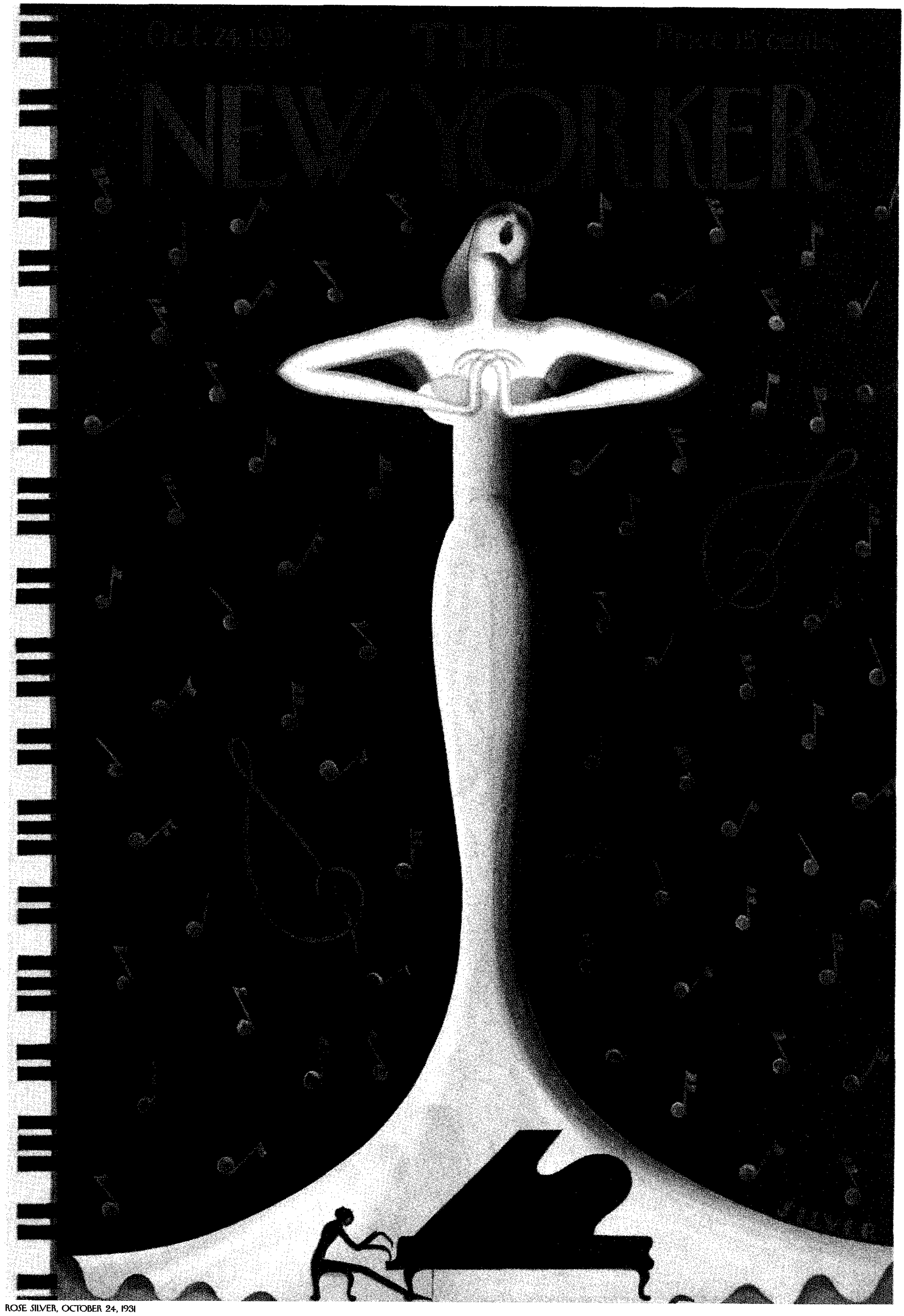
ART SPIEGELMAN, FEBRUARY 15, 1993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THE
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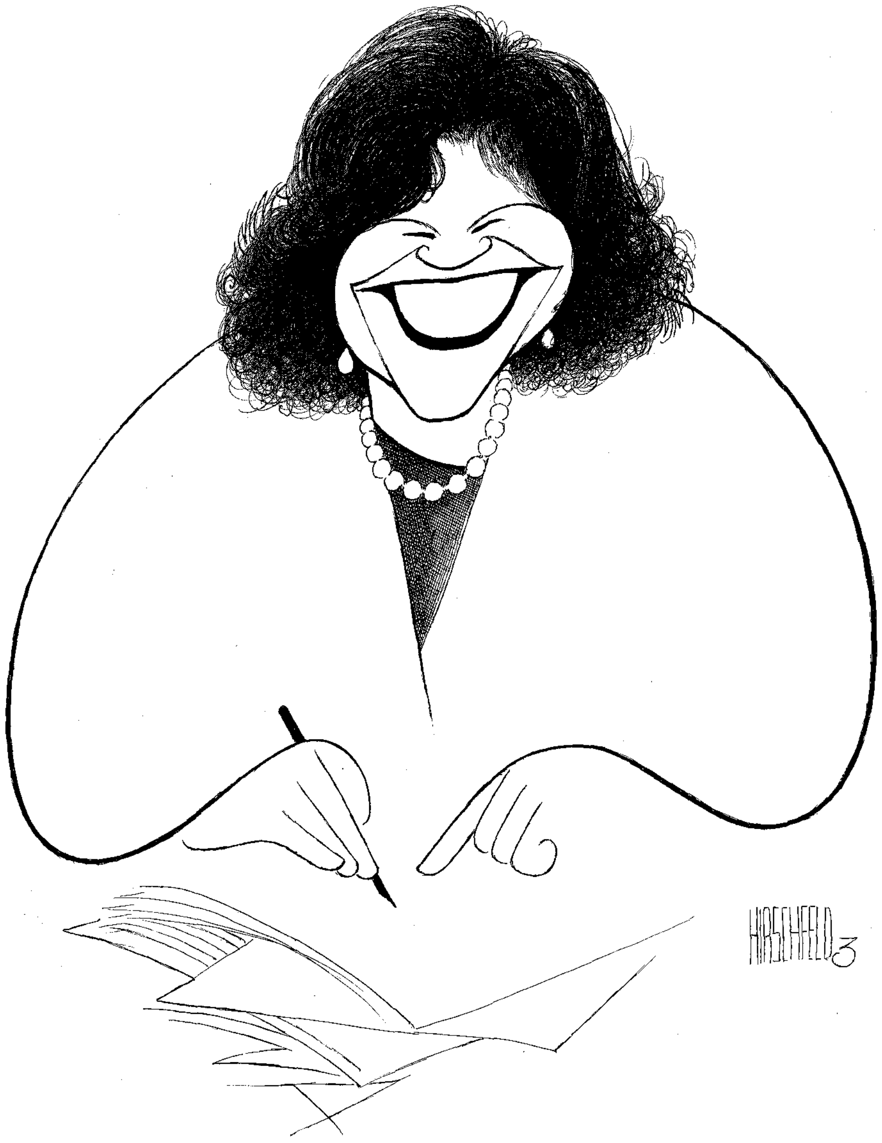
ANNALS OF MOTHERHOOD

COMPLICATIONS

The author thought that getting pregnant would be the hard part.

BY WENDY WASSERSTEIN



"I looked up at the sonogram screen and saw a tiny hand waving at me, as if to say, 'Hold on, Mom. I'm coming!' "

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I got up at 5 A.M. on August 27th to write Fay Francis's eulogy. Fay was a descendant of New York's Harriman family, a Wasp doyenne who lived on the Upper East Side and was always properly decked out in pumps, gloves, and Schlumberger brooches. Almost every Christmas Day for twenty years, I had eaten Christmas lunch with Fay and her son André Bishop, who is the artistic director of Lincoln Center Theatre and one of my oldest friends, at the Colony Club. Every year, at cocktail time, Fay presented me with a purse suitable for the Queen Mother.

As I began to gather my memories of Fay that morning, I felt a tingling from my left elbow to my hand. I figured it had to be psychosomatic. I had never been asked to be the opening act at an Episcopal service before. Furthermore, although Fay was eighty-two, her death had unnerved me. I remembered my last conversation with her. Because she had been ill the previous Christmas, we had cancelled our lunch, but I had called to wish her well.

"Thing is, lamb, I worry about you," she had said in her stately old New York accent. "All the men your age are either married or gay, and the single ones want young things. You have your work and your friends, but you deserve some personal happiness, too."

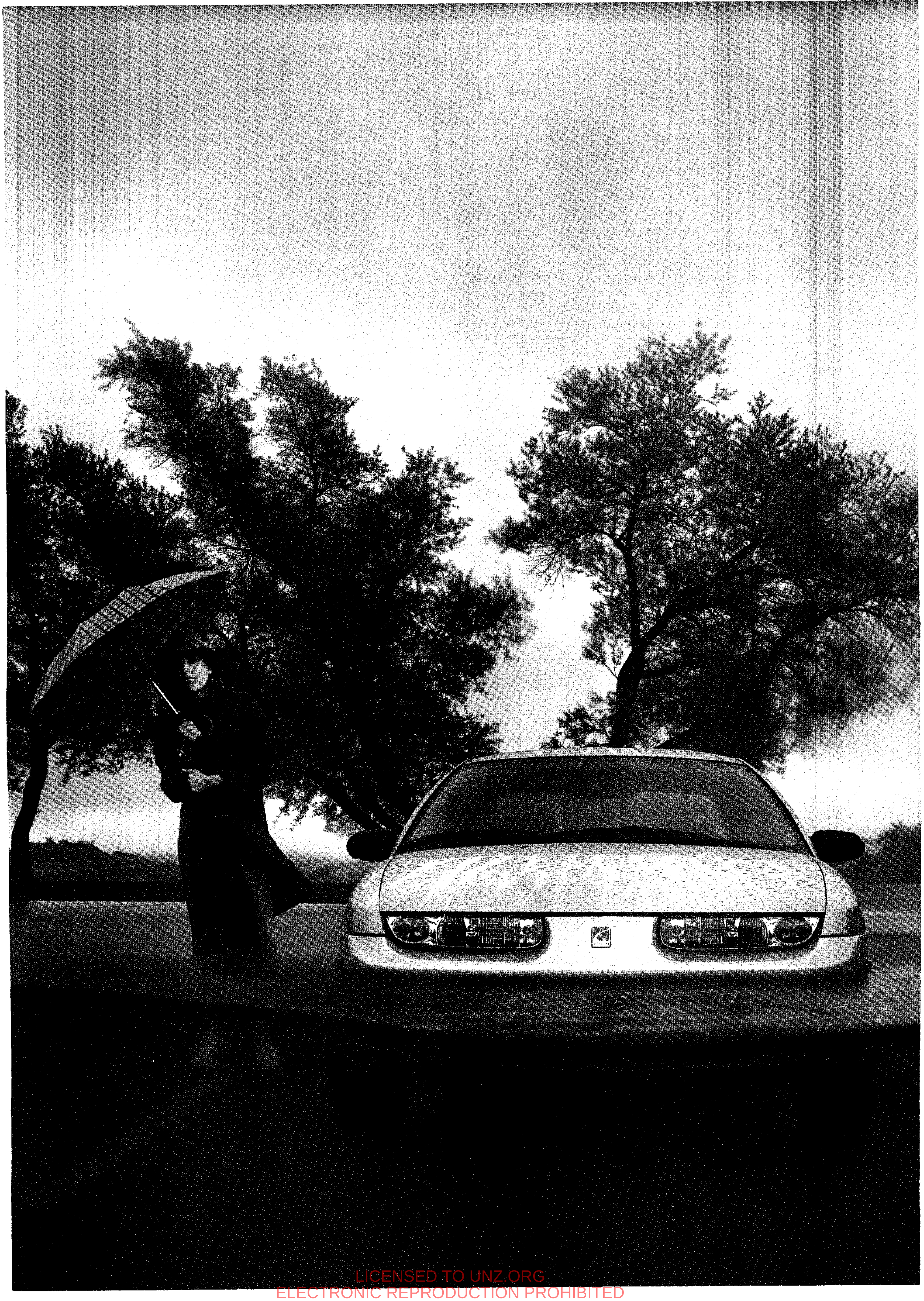
For the funeral, I put on a gray suit and gray pearls. I even made an appointment at an Upper East Side salon to get my hair blown straight. If I was going to give a eulogy at St. James Church, I was going to look like St. James Church. Unfortunately, instead of making my hair straight, the hairdresser decided to express herself through my natural curls. I arrived at the church looking like an extra from "Yentl."

André's brother George, an Oxford-educated minister, presided over the service wearing a white robe with gold vestments. George told us that he knew his mother had found redemption at the end of her life because, in April, she had sent pears to his father's ailing second wife and, in May, Georgia peaches. I had never known that the Fruit of the Month Club was the road to salvation.

When I finally reached the pulpit and began to speak, my voice cracked. Maybe it was my affection for Fay, or the unaccustomed tingling in my hand. Or maybe I was simply unhinged by the passing of time. Looking out over the pews of the church, I recognized theatre colleagues whom I had known for a quarter of a century. Over the years, we had all become part of one another's family.

Of course, as with most families, the majority of mine who had gathered at St. James that morning didn't have the slightest idea what was going on in my life. On August 27, 1999, I was forty-eight years old and six months pregnant.

It's not like I got knocked up. Most forty-eight-year-old women don't. I had made my first appointment with a fertility doctor at Mount Sinai Hospital when I turned forty. For the next eight years, I progressed from artificial insem-



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inations to egg-stimulating Chlomid pills and on to daily injections of Pergonal. When I had first contemplated becoming a mother, I was involved with a man who I hoped would be the father. But when we stopped seeing each other I felt there was no reason to abandon the project. A male friend agreed to help me.

Fertility treatments, even more than high-school dances, are a regular confirmation of negative femininity, with every disappointment underscored by megadoses of hormones. There's nothing like sitting in fertility doctors' offices, looking at photos of the children they've nudged into creation and knowing that you're the negative statistic. It becomes an addictive impossible dream.

As my failure rate accelerated, I moved into high-tech reproductive territory: I tried in-vitro fertilization, GIFT (gamete intra-fallopian-tube transfer), and, finally, surrogacy. Marcy, from Alaska, flew in to be implanted with embryos created out of my eggs and donated sperm. Unfortunately, the embryos deteriorated somehow in packing or storage, and were unusable. Marcy went back to Alaska.

At that point, I started looking into adoption. But I had lost my momentum. While I was being injected with hormones that could make a tyrannosaurus give birth to a foldout couch, my oldest sister, Sandra Meyer, who was an advanced breast-cancer patient, was having monthly chemotherapy treatments.

I have a photograph of Sandra from the mid-nineteen-sixties, surrounded by men in suits, when she was the first female product-group manager at General Foods. Explaining my sister's career to my high-school friends, I'd simply say that she sent Tang to the moon with the astronauts. She was defiant during her long illness, and I'm sure that my obsession with getting pregnant was partly a wish to bring her some life-affirming news.

Sandra died in December of 1997, at sixty. My family scattered her ashes on the beach in East Hampton on New Year's Eve.

Almost a year after my sister's death, I was having lunch at Café des Artistes when an attractive man whose face I couldn't quite place tapped me on the shoulder.

"Wendy, it's me, Michael Drews," he

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Left to right: Portrait of a man, about AD 125-50, Antikensammlung, Munich; Portrait of a young woman, about AD 70, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; and Portrait of a man, about AD 160-80, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1909.

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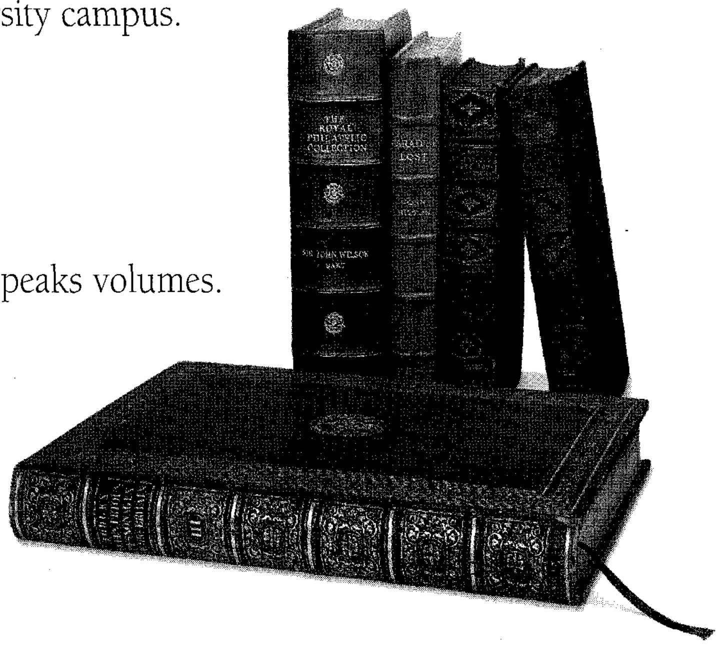
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said. He was my first and most compassionate fertility doctor. "How've you been?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I answered, smiling up at him. "I'm O.K., and I've given up on that other thing."

"That's why I came over," he said, his voice cheerful and, as always, a little too quick. "Things have improved dramatically since you started, and I'd say you've got a good chance for success today. Call me. I'm at St. Barnabas Hospital, in New Jersey."

Six months later, I was lying on a day-surgery gurney in Livingston, New Jersey, watching my egg-and-sperm combination platter on live-action video. An embryologist in the room next door was siphoning the embryos from a petri dish into a tube. It was a surreal cross between PBS's "Nature" and the Food Channel.

Dr. Drews entered the room with the magic tube, which was the width of a pipe cleaner. As he inserted it into my uterus, he said, "So, Wendy, are you writing?"

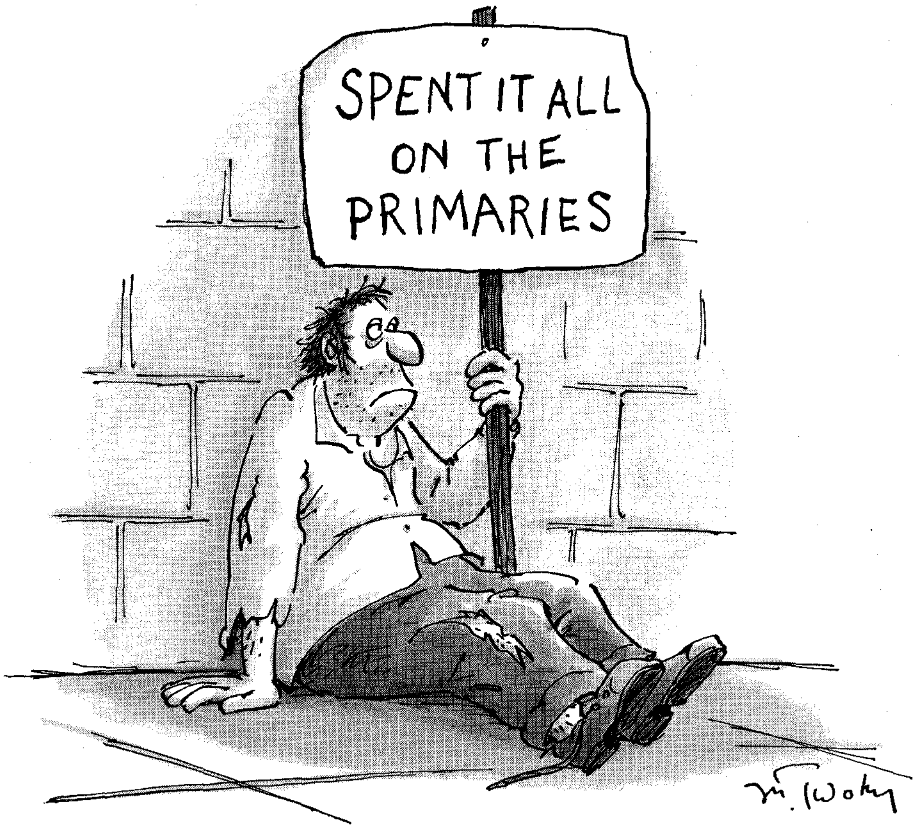
"Yes. I started a new play," I said. "But it's not as interesting as this!"

"Let's keep our fingers crossed," he said when the procedure was over. As he left, I noticed that he was wearing clogs. A lot of doctors wear them. I've never understood why.

I got on a flight to Europe the next night. Looking out at the stars, I began to weep. I wasn't crying for Sandra exactly, or for fear that this last effort would again prove to be futile. For eight years, I had believed that the greatest regret of my life would be childlessness. I realized now that I was finally willing to give that up. The decade of loss had almost passed, and I was content to be uprooted, in space, alone.

After my return home, one afternoon two weeks later, there was a message on my answering machine from a lab: "Congratulations. You're pregnant." My due date was approximately Christmas, 1999. It was a millennium prophecy close to a miracle.

My decision to keep my pregnancy a secret from most of my friends was a simple one. I knew that I was teetering on the high end of high risk. If the baby didn't come to term after all these years of trying, I wanted it to be a personal loss, not a public one. My plan was to wait until Labor Day, well into my seventh month, and then to inform my friends that the twenty pounds I had recently gained were not the result of bad habits and anxiety. And Labor Day was when my brother Bruce and his wife were expecting their second child.


SPENT IT ALL ON THE PRIMARIES

After Fay's funeral, I went to my regular appointment at the East Side Women's Ob/Gyn Associates. A nurse wrapped a Velcro-lined cuff around my upper arm. She looked at me sternly. "Your blood pressure is a little high," she said. "Relax for a few minutes. Don't be nervous. I'll be back."

Although I'm a big, hearty girl, even in routine circumstances I could be voted Miss White Coat Syndrome. Ever since my sister's death, I've been convinced that any protracted time spent with a health-care professional is a prelude to terminal illness.

The nurse returned in five minutes and wrapped the cuff around my arm again. "It's higher now!" She seemed to be irritated with me. "I told you to relax! Lie on your left side and the doctor will be with you in a few minutes."

I reached for a magazine and came upon a detailed account of Cindy Crawford's pregnancy: Cindy is "over the moon" about her baby. Cindy does yoga and is working out all the way through. Cindy never has swollen fingers and legs. Cindy never has to lie on her left side.

Twenty minutes later, Dr. Laurie Goldstein came into the room. Dr. Goldstein is deeply committed to women's-health issues, and she still wears the insignia of her activist generation: dangling earrings, little makeup, and evolved-graduate-student attire.

"I hear your blood pressure is high," she said, wrapping the Velcro cuff around me again.

"Well, I get nervous," I said. "And I was planning on leaving for England tonight."

"Try to relax." She started squeezing the blood-pressure pump again and asked me, "Did you know you have protein in your urine?"

"No. I spoke at a funeral this morning." I held up Cindy's pregnancy photos. "You shouldn't keep things like this around your office."

"You're absolutely right." She looked at me intently. "I want you to get into a

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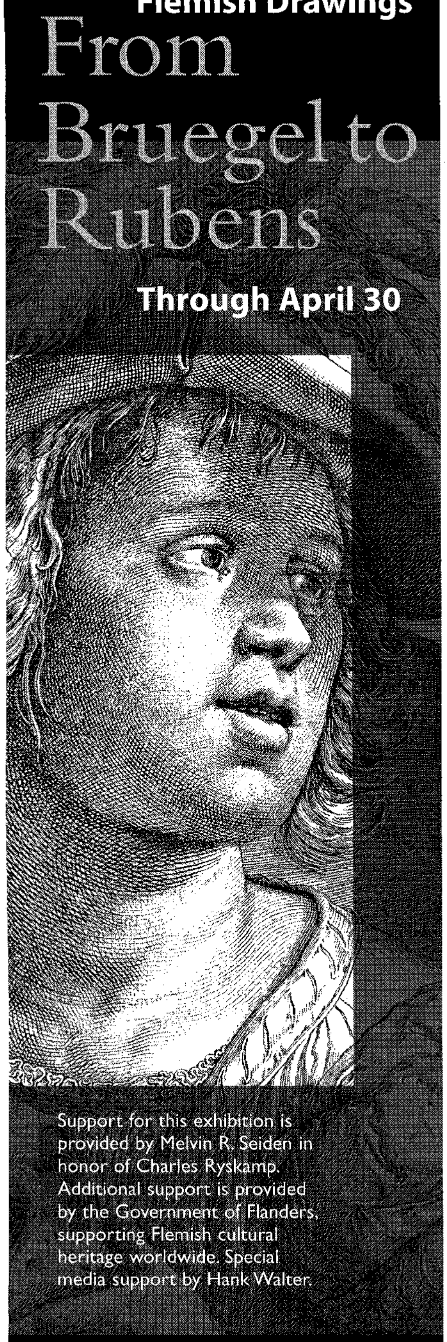

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Hendrick Goltzius, *Young Man Holding a Skull and a Tulip* (detail), 1614

taxi and go over to Mount Sinai Hospital. Your blood pressure is very high, and there's a chance you have preëclampsia."

"Who?" I asked her in a panic.

She explained, "Preëclampsia is a high-blood-pressure condition that can lead to liver and kidney failure. I'm not saying that you have it. And, if you do, most likely we can treat it by keeping you in bed until your delivery."

"I'm sorry," I said. When I'm frightened, I become excessively polite. "Can I go home first to get a few things?"

"Get a friend to bring them to you. I want you to go right now."

Half an hour later, my gray St. James suit was strewn over a stool in the Labor and Delivery ward at Mount Sinai's Klingenstein Pavilion.

Michele K. Silverstein, a doctor in her thirties with brown curly hair and kind brown eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, is the junior member of the obstetrics associates. She is also the person every modern Jewish mother secretly hopes her daughter will turn out to be. She has the earnestness of a science jock, but it's offset by a skating-rink-size diamond from her hematologist husband.

"Are you comfortable in here?" she asked about my quarters.

"I'm in a Kafka story, Michele!"

"Look, I hope it's just for the night," she said. "We'll monitor you and probably send you home tomorrow."

I called William Ivey Long, an old friend from the Yale Drama School, who had been my fertility confidant. He was in the middle of designing costumes for the upcoming musicals "Contact" and "Swing!" and for the Broadway play "Epic Proportions." Even so, he rushed over to spend the night on the reclining guest chair in my hospital room.

No one sleeps in hospitals. Bells ring throughout the night, and every room has a round-the-clock open-door policy. Every two hours, I was awakened to have my blood pressure taken. At four in the morning, a nurse told me, "It's one-eighty-nine over ninety-five. Relax and lie on your left side."

As far as I can make out, relaxing and lying on your left side is the treatment for preëclampsia. Preëclampsia, I came to learn, is better known by the name toxemia. It is most often diagnosed by protein in the patient's urine, swelling of extremities, and hypertension. In a pregnant woman, the condition can lead to a seizure, and possibly a coma. An affected fetus can suffer from stunted growth, or can die if the placenta separates from the uterus. The only cure for preëclampsia is delivery. When the condition occurs late in the third trimester, mothers are immediately scheduled for childbirth.

Laurie Goldstein reappeared the next morning with bad news: I showed all the classic signs of preëclampsia. I was to be moved to the fourth floor for a weekend of observation. I tried to take deep breaths and think about those pears from the Fruit of the Month Club. Maybe they could be my salvation, too.

I had never been hospitalized before, and hadn't realized that the experience was a non-stop meet and greet. In addition to bi-hourly blood-pressure monitoring, I was being treated by rotating cardiologists. One of them, Robert Phillips, an M.D./Ph.D. in his forties, reminded me of science majors I had known in college. He was accessible, and, with the right anecdote, I could make him giggle.

On Monday, after taking my pressure three times, Dr. Phillips explained the various blood-pressure medications I was taking. The phenobarbital, he told me, could make me groggy and forgetful. Then he mentioned that another doctor would be covering for him the following week, because he had to go to Houston. I asked him why.

"I'm going to the National Space Biomedical Research Institute," he told me. "There's going to be a human settlement on Mars, and I want to be part of Mount Sinai's advisory team."

"Mars! Really?" I was sure I was experiencing a phenobarbital reaction.

"I'm competing against doctors from Stanford and Penn," he told me.

"You know, it's important you get this," I said. "They're always sending people like John Glenn or Sally Ride into space. They need Jews from Mount Sinai!"

"Try to lie on your left side," he calmly admonished me.

I rolled over. "Listen, you've probably got the old *ma nishtana* problem here. Why is your proposal for Mars different from anybody else's? You need to punch it up."

"Punch it up?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure. You need a laugh on the third line," I said. "Like a family anecdote—that always warms the room."

"That's good," Dr. Phillips said, impressed, and he handed me a copy of his proposal: "The Effect of Microgravity on Cardiovascular Hemodynamics."

On Monday morning, as I was trying to translate Dr. Phillips's cardiovascular-speak, my troika of female obstetricians—Laurie, Michele, and Rebecca Brightman—appeared. Becky Brightman is a beauty. With dark hair and bright-blue eyes, she reminded me of Suzanne Pleshette in her pre-Bob Newhart phase. The three of them advised me to stay in the hospital until as close to my due date as possible. I was twenty-five weeks pregnant; that meant three months at Mount Sinai.

The next day, while I was calculating how I would inform the Princeton Theatre Department that I would not be teaching playwriting that fall, Dr. Richard Berkowitz, the hospital's head of obstetrics, came in. In his opinion, my preëclampsia was potentially life-threatening and I should prepare myself to have the baby that afternoon, depending on the lab results. As I was absorbing my new schedule, a nurse came in and told me to clean up my room because I was expected to be out by 11 A.M.

For the first time, I didn't care about being voted Miss Mount Sinai Congeniality. I lowered my voice. "You know, it's impossible to lie on my left side and to be out of this room at 11 A.M. I'm a person, not a grouper!"

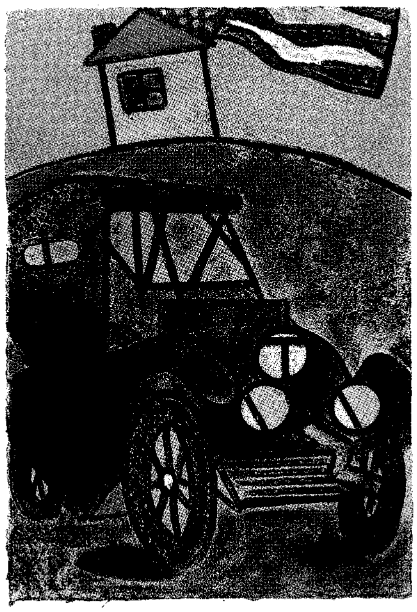
I had no idea where the grouper came from. Maybe it was imagery left over from the service at St. James. Or maybe I was starring in a pro-life Christian docudrama warning young girls not to grow up into self-centered heathens: Marry young and procreate!

Two hours later, I was lying on a gurney awaiting a cesarean. Michele K. Silverstein came to see me.

"I've asked Ian Holzman, who runs the neonatal unit here, to talk to you about premature babies."

In all my years in pursuit of fertility, the possibility of having a premature child had never occurred to me. The

TAKES



RICHARD MERKIN

Not many subscribers or contributors can claim to remember each of the three thousand eight hundred and seventy-five issues of The New Yorker published so far, but what does come flooding to mind on this anniversary date is a rush of remarkable prose, by writers and reporters we have counted as our own. In this issue, and through the coming year, we are presenting brief samples from this trove, taken not quite at random.

—The Editors

During my association with Model T's, self-starters were not a prevalent accessory. They were expensive and under suspicion. Your car came equipped with a serviceable crank, and the first thing you learned was how to Get Results. It was a special trick, and until you learned it (usually from another Ford owner, but sometimes by a period of appalling experimentation) you might as well have been winding up an awning. The trick was to leave the ignition switch off, proceed to the animal's head, pull the choke (which was a little wire protruding through the radiator), and give the crank two or three nonchalant upward lifts. Then, whistling as though thinking about something else, you would saunter back to the driver's cabin, turn the ignition on, return to the crank, and this time, catching it on the down stroke, give it a quick spin with plenty of That. If this procedure was followed, the engine almost always responded—first with a few scattered explosions, then with a tumultuous gunfire, which you checked by racing around to the driver's seat and retarding the throttle. Often, if the emergency brake hadn't been pulled all the way back, the car advanced on you the instant the first explosion occurred and you would hold it back by leaning your weight against it. I can still feel my old Ford nuzzling me at the curb, as though looking for an apple in my pocket.

—E. B. White
"Farewell, My Lovely!" (Onward & Upward with the Arts), May 16, 1936

trick had been to get pregnant. Period.

Dr. Ian Holzman is a warm, energetic man in his fifties with a gray beard. When he came to see me, he said, "You should know that babies born after only twenty-five weeks' gestation are at a higher risk for having lung or brain damage than those born even at thirty weeks. That's not to say it's inevitable." He smiled at me with a comforting familiarity. "But you should know."

Lying on my gurney, I decided that I'd moved on from Christian docudrama to the plague portion of the Passover Seder, when we dip our pinkies into wine to represent the hideous disasters the good Lord inflicted on the Egyptians: locusts, frogs, pestilence, infertility, preëclampsia, brain damage.

A nurse stuck her head in: "Your ex-husband is here!" I had no idea whom she could be talking about.

My friend Gerald Gutierrez, the Broadway director, pulled back the curtain. "Hello, darling," he said. "I hear you're not a grouper!"

Suddenly, Michele K. Silverstein burst in. "So we're not operating," she said.

Dr. Berkowitz joined us to explain. "I just spoke to one of the leading experts on preëclampsia, in Tennessee," he told us. "His experience with the severity and early onset of your preëclampsia indicates that we have more time than we thought." In general, he said, every day in the womb is equal to three days in the N.I.C.U.—Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. "The longer we can keep that baby inside of you, the better the baby's chances for survival are." He smiled at me. "So I've gotten you a room back on the Labor and Delivery floor, and we'll just keep you there as long as we can."

Gerry Gutierrez pushed the gurney down the hall. I looked up at him and said, "Now we've got time to punch up a speech for this guy who wants to go to Mars."

When I called my friend Jane Rosenthal to tell her about my new fall plans, she immediately swung into action. Jane is a movie producer and a crackerjack organizer. She reached William Ivey Long during the final dress rehearsal of "Contact" and told him to get up to Mount Sinai to redecorate my room.

At nine in the morning, William arrived with an armful of coördinated blue floral curtains, pillows, and Monet posters. The room, formerly a beige netherworld, became the decorator showroom of the second floor. Nurses and hospital attendants popped in throughout the day to ask William for color and fabric tips.

The nights were more challenging. To ward off any chance of seizure, I was now attached to an intravenous magnesium drip, which made me nauseous. I've never been good at asking for help. As an Ethical Culture School graduate, I have always believed that my purpose is to be generous and to serve others. But when I was too ill to make it to the bathroom, Angela, the night nurse, who wore a medallion around her neck that said "Girl Power," would bring me a pan for the nausea. She gave me soothing sponge baths, too. I quickly became obsessed with the disparity between Angela's paycheck and Demi Moore's.

Each day, I left my stylish nest in Labor and Delivery to have a sonogram, and one morning the doctor doing the sonogram asked if I would like to know the sex of the baby. Before the preëclampsia, I had decided to let the baby's gender be a surprise. But now I wanted all my cards on the table.

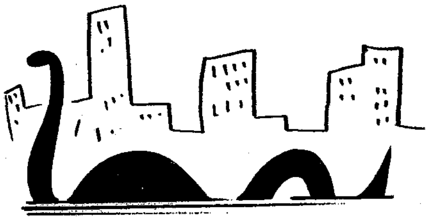
"It's a girl," the doctor told me. "There's her hand," she said, moving an ultrasound mouse over my stomach.

I looked up at the screen and saw a tiny hand waving at me, as if to say, "Hold on, Mom. I'm coming!"

"Do you want a copy of that?" the doctor asked me. I kept it by my bedside for the rest of my stay.

When I made it to the Jewish holidays—a full week—without my kidneys collapsing, my doctors were thrilled with me. My anxiety level, however, was mounting for a different reason. I had told my mother a week earlier about my pregnancy, but she had no idea that I was in the hospital.

The last time my mother, Lola Wasserstein, had been in a hospital, she had watched her oldest daughter die of cancer. I knew it would be impossible for me to lie on my left side and to keep my blood pressure down with my mother sitting by, weeping and seeing Sandra in me. So for her sake, and for the sake of my daughter, I decided I could not invite my mother to Labor and Delivery.



"Your mother called me, crying," my agent told me just after Labor Day. "She asked me where you were."

My blood pressure was up again. I left a message on my mother's machine: "Hello, Mother. I'm still in England with Flora. I'm having a wonderful time."

After twelve days in the hospital, the news about my condition was suddenly not so good. "Your blood platelets are beginning to drop," Becky Brightman informed me at 10 A.M. "Don't panic. It's a matter of the entire picture."

But I was panicking, and not just about my platelets. A nurse had just told me that my brother Bruce and his pregnant wife, Claude, had booked the delivery room across the hall from me for the following week. I started imagining a scene from a Marx Brothers movie, "A Day at the Hospital": While Bruce is telling Claude to breathe, he sees me being pushed to the sonogram room with my magnesium-drip sidekick.

On Sunday morning, sixteen days after I was admitted, Michele K. Silverstein came to see me. "How would you like to have a baby today?" she asked.

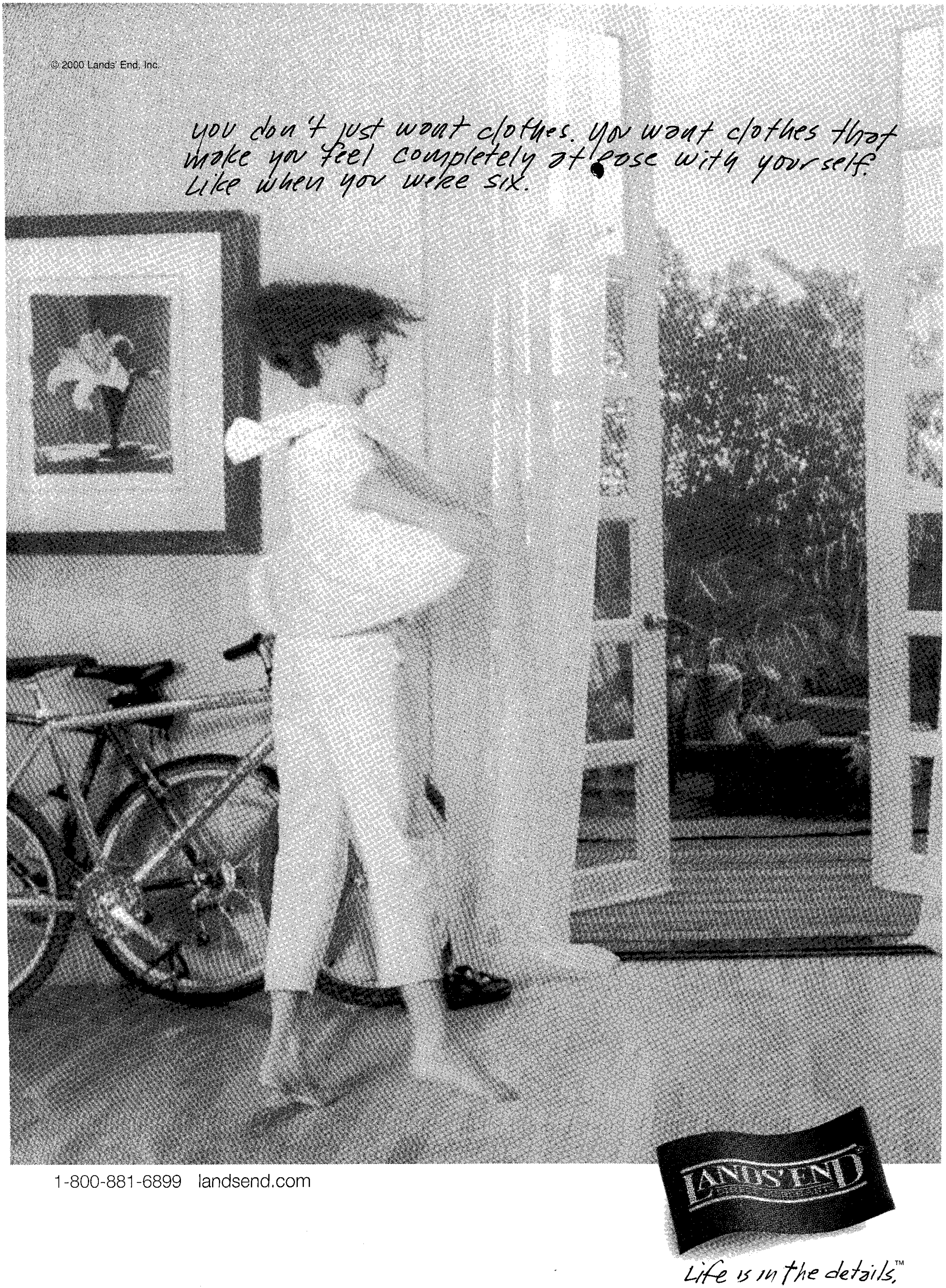
At 12:45 P.M., I was wheeled into the operating room accompanied by two female obstetricians, two female nurses, a female anesthesiologist, and Gerry Gutierrez. I felt as if I were back in class at Mount Holyoke, in 1967, with one visiting male student from Amherst. It was familiar in the best possible way.

I don't think I really connected lying on that brightly lit table with bringing new life into the world. Looking down at Becky and Michele, with their intelligent, professional faces and perfectly coiffed heads, I imagined that they were having a heated conversation in the Neiman Marcus shoe department.

"J. P. Tod's." Becky examines my pelvis.

"Manolo Blahnik." Michele passes Becky an instrument.

My cesarean lasted approximately an hour. Gerry held my head. At two-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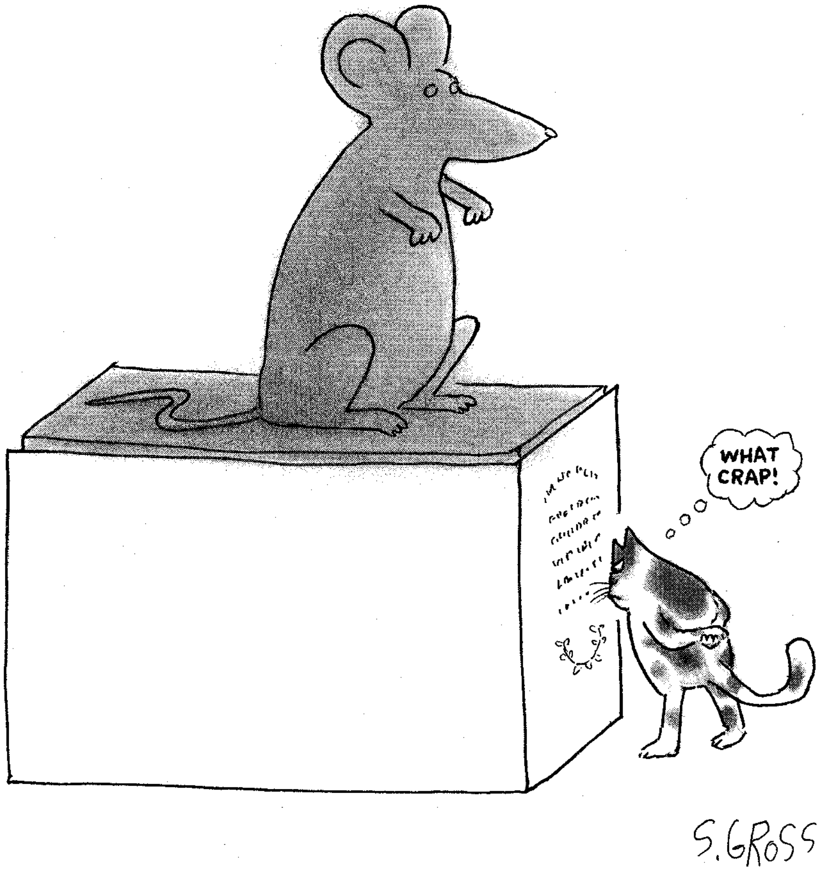

twenty-five, I heard a cry and saw a baby out of the corner of my eye.

"Congratulations! You have a daughter," Becky Brightman said to me.

The baby was whisked away to the hospital's N. I. C. U. She was about fourteen inches long and weighed seven hundred and ninety grams, or one pound twelve ounces.

I had called my brother Bruce just before the delivery, and at nine that night he approached the desk at the N.I.C.U. "I'm here to see Baby Wasserstein," he announced.

"Do you have some I.D.?" the receptionist asked.

"I'm Bruce Wasserstein," my brother answered. "I'm the baby's father."

"Someone else came in who said he was the father," she said, referring to Gerry, who had been given a hospital bracelet marked "Father" when we were in the delivery room.

"Yes. That's right. Well, he's the father and I'm the father."

In short order, my brother, an iconoclastic investment banker who had protected oil companies from T. Boone Pickens and advises movie studios about the dot-com world, managed to secure permanent visitation rights as a parent.

The day after I delivered, the news that I had had a baby flashed through the theatre community. One rumor that would become a particular favorite of mine was that I had been pregnant and hadn't known it.

That morning, Ian Holzman and his neonatal residents came in to see me at eight o'clock. "Your daughter had a bad night," he informed me gently. "You've got a very sick little girl. I just want you to know that." He smiled kindly and left.

This was the first I had heard of my daughter's condition. I couldn't really take it all in. My pediatrician later explained that the illness was hyaline membrane disease, a lung affliction common in premature babies. I knew that it had caused the death of Jacqueline Kennedy's third child, Patrick.

After dinner, a nurse wheeled me upstairs to see my baby for the first time. My family genes do not specialize in shoulder blades or collarbones. The first thing I noticed about my daughter was that she has shoulders like Audrey Hepburn's when she wears that white strapless Cecil Beaton number in "My Fair Lady." She was also wearing a "What's My Line" eye mask. This was to shield her eyes from the bright lights that were installed to correct her high bilirubin levels, which had caused jaundice. Even in her Isolette-brand incubator, my daughter was elegant.

"She's sleeping, Mommy," an N.I.C.U. nurse told me. The nurses there call every mother "Mommy."

My daughter was attached to an I.V. drip for feeding. Lying on her side, she had a C-PAP (continuous positive airway pressure) tube in one nostril, to keep her lungs inflated. On her chest were penny-size sticky pads holding down wires that were attached to a machine that measures heart rate, pulse, and oxygen level. Any time her oxygen level or heart rate became abnormal, bells would go off. There were forty babies in the N.I.C.U., and each was attached to monitors like these. With bells going off constantly, the place sounded like S. Klein's during a lingerie sale.

Dr. Holzman came over to me as I looked at my baby from my wheelchair. "She needs a name," he said.

"I'm working on it," I told him. Names are a big deal to a playwright.

"Well, pick something. She's doing much better." He made a knock-on-wood gesture. "She's a good baby, even if she does look like you wouldn't pick her out in the poultry department."

"Thank you." I decided to take this as a compliment. He sees poultry. I see Audrey Hepburn.

The Nipple Nazis attacked the next day at dawn.

"Are you pumping?" an ultra-thin woman demanded from my doorway.

"Not yet," I answered. "I just had preëclampsia, a cesarean, and my daughter was born at twenty-seven weeks. I think I need to sleep."

"You must pump every three hours!" she announced. "Or you will dry up."

She wheeled in a breast pump that looked as if it could bail out a battleship. Sternly, she showed me how to pump each breast separately or, if I liked, both together, a sort of duet for mammaries.

Duly intimidated, I tried to sit up and attach two plastic bottles to my now

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Hindenberg-size breasts. Hurricane Floyd was raging outside, and incision staples were pinching my stomach. Then a hospital social worker came into the room. "Your mother is here," she said. "She doesn't know if you want to see her." Bruce had told my mother about the birth. I still hadn't spoken to her.

For most of my life, my mother, Lola, who has the petite build of a Fosse dancer, had told people that her age was "twenty-one plus." When her oldest granddaughter turned thirty, my mother became "thirty," too. Although I have given up trying to estimate how old she is, it is clear that my mother is a trouper. Even at "thirty," she takes Broadway dance classes every day.

My mother sat next to my hospital bed wearing black leather pants, a multicolored sweater, and a bright knit cap. My father, in a gray suit, sat silently beside her.

"We saw the baby. She's very little," my mother said.

I continued eating orange Jell-O.

"We thought you didn't want to see us, but your father had an appointment here at Gerontology."

"Are you O.K., Dad?" I asked.

"He's fine." Lola is my father's official spokesperson.

I looked at my mother. Her dark eyes were shining as if she were still a girl playing by the Vistula River in Poland.

"Mother, I want you to go back to see the baby and tell her you're her grandma." I took her hand. "I want you to pass your energy on to her. I want you to teach her how to survive!"

My mother dropped my hand. "She's my grandchild! Of course she'll survive!"

Later, my sister Georgette told me that when our mother first saw my baby and heard the details of my delivery she cried as inconsolably as she had when Sandra died.

"I have a name for my daughter," I announced to Dr. Holzman five days after the delivery. I was examining a twinkling ruby light on my baby's big toe. The light was heating up her capillaries and tracking her blood pressure.

"Well, what's her name?" a nurse with a long braid asked me.

"Lucy Jane," I answered.

"I'm Catherine," the nurse said. "I was the nurse who admitted your daughter and will be her primary-care nurse during her stay here."

There are at least fifteen nurses on duty at the N.I.C.U. None of them is more efficient than Catherine McCarron. She cares for at least four premature babies and, perhaps even more difficult, deals with their mothers.

"Would you like to hold Lucy?" Catherine asked me that morning.

"Hold her?" I asked. Lucy was attached to at least six wires and was the size of my outstretched hand. So far, our contact had been through the incubator's porthole.

"It's called kangaroo care," she explained. "It started in Colombia, where premature babies don't have the medical advantages of babies in a place like this. But a mother just holding her baby, skin to skin, makes an enormous difference."

I washed my hands as Catherine opened the incubator. She handed me my daughter. Lucy Jane was almost weightless. Her tiny legs dangled like a doll's. Her diaper was the size of a cigarette pack. I opened my sweater and put her inside. Her face was the size of a small apple. She wore a tiny pink-and-blue-striped cap that made her look like Santa's tiniest elf.

I began to sing to her softly: "Picture yourself on a boat on a river where tangerine peaches meet marshmallow skies." I knew that those weren't the right lyrics, but they were close enough. I told my daughter I had named her Lucy because when she waved to me from the sonogram I thought of her as Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds, saying hello.

The bells in the N.I.C.U. continued to ring. Mothers sat by their tiny infants, fighting for life in their Isolettes. I sat there among them, wanting my daughter to see a full moon and eat a peach. Her nickel-size feet tickled my breast. I couldn't cry in the N.I.C.U. We were there, I hoped, for the long haul.

One morning, three weeks after I had spoken at Fay Francis's funeral, Rebecca Brightman arrived in my hospital room to remove my staples and to tell me it was time for me to go home.

I walked out of the Klingenstein Pavilion onto Fifth Avenue on the day before Yom Kippur. The city seemed to be in Technicolor. James Lapine and Heidi Ettinger, friends from drama school, had come to take me home. Lucy would be staying in the N.I.C.U. until at least December 14th, my original due date.

I watched as couples walked through the revolving door, holding their newborns in their required-by-law car seats. These parents were satisfied customers. They got what they came for. I felt ashamed of envying them—after all, I was alive, and so was Lucy. But I did envy them.

The day after I arrived home, there was a message on my answering machine from the N.I.C.U. Lucy had needed a transfusion. When I reached Catherine McCarron, she told me that the hospital had moved quickly because Lucy had become anemic. After assuring me that everything was O.K., she said, "I think I may also have overstepped myself. Your mother happened to come in for a visit when the transfusion was happening and I think it threw her."

I imagined Lola grabbing her heart and knocking over several Isolettes.

"She caused a little bit of a stir. So I hope you don't mind, but I asked her to come only with you or with scheduled permission. Is that all right?"

"Yes. It's fine. I'm sorry. Thank you, Catherine."

I hung up and called my mother.

"I hate that Irish nurse," Lola said. "Everyone else there loves me. But if you don't want me to go I won't go."

"I want you to go, Mother," I said. "Just next time come with me."

On the holiest night of the year, after Yom Kippur services at Temple Emanu-El, I took a taxi back to the Klingenstein Pavilion. It was ten o'clock and I learned that Lucy Jane had had another reversal. She had lost around fifty grams after the transfusion, and now she had a respirator tube taped over her nose and mouth. My daughter, like some other critical babies in the N.I.C.U., was under a plastic container, as if she were a hydroponic Bibb lettuce. I put my hand through the Isolette porthole and stroked her tiny fingers.

When I was in college, there was a popular aphorism: "Smith to bed, Holyoke to wed." That sums up why my mother had been glad when I decided on Mount Holyoke. She thought I'd pick up a little art history plus a husband—

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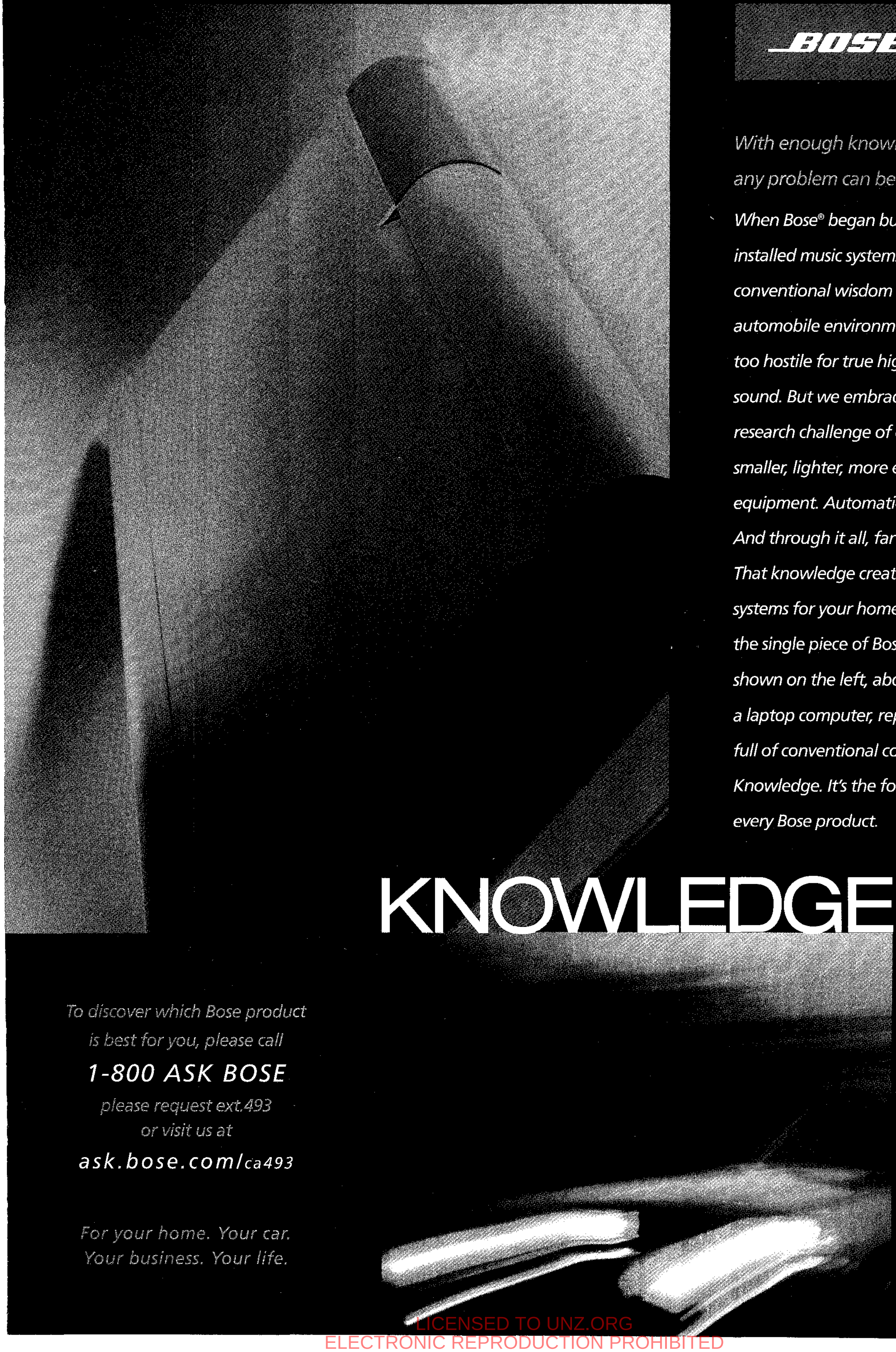

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and security. But I've never understood how marriage is supposed to guarantee safety. Leaving the N.I.C.U. that night, though, I wished that all the ridiculous myths were true: if a man in a suit could make this easier, I thought, I would happily return to Temple Emanu-El for emergency Yom Kippur nuptials. But even a man in a suit is no guarantee against lung damage and anemia.

The N.I.C.U. is a large open space divided in the front by a long reception desk and ringed by a wallpaper border of rabbits and Teddy bears in hot-air balloons. The Isolettes are lined up against the walls, with about four feet—room for a rocking chair—between them. The babies in the most critical condition are in the back area. The ratio of babies to nurses there is two to one. In the front, on the left, are the long-term tenants, preemies who will be staying a month or two, roughly until their natural due date. The ratio of infants to nurses here is four to one. To the right are the short-term residents, who will stay anywhere from one night to a week. These babies tend to be twins with a touch of jaundice, or full-term newborns with some small complication.

Two weeks after Lucy Jane arrived, Catherine told me that my daughter was being promoted out of the critical nook. "She's been able to breathe without the C-PAP, so she's moving up front."

Lucy Jane Wasserstein's see-through mobile home was rolled to the front left corner of the N.I.C.U. Living alongside Lucy was a baby whom I'll call Shayna Hutchinson. She was born a month before Lucy and now weighed approximately three pounds. Most preemies turn the corner when they weigh a kilo (2.2 pounds). Shayna had achieved that goal; Lucy was still working on it.

I recognized Shayna's mother, Miss Hutchinson, from our time at the back of the room, when our babies were still critical. A tall African-American woman, she guarded her daughter jealously. On Shayna's Isolette was a sticker that read "Please Call Mother Day or Night with Any News on Her Condition." At first, Miss Hutchinson seldom said hello. In a nearby corner was Mrs. King, another African-American woman, and her son, and to her right were the Kaur twins, Tony and Tina, whose father owns an Indian restaurant on Columbus Avenue. Together with the Asian, Caribbean, and Irish nurses, our wing of the N.I.C.U. redefined a multicultural neighborhood. Competitively, we'd all check out each other's baby's weight. Compassionately, we'd ask a nurse if everything was all right when a cardiac monitor light suddenly blinked on. In our zone, none of the babies except the Kaur twins had a visible father.

There is a rhythm to visiting the N.I.C.U. I went twice a day, mostly at feeding times, with my ready-to-go bottles of home-pumped milk. Once their lungs are strong enough, the babies move from I.V.s to nasogastric tubes. Every three hours, mother's milk is pumped into a tiny tube that drips into the baby's nose. Most preemies have to build up the strength to suck from a bottle.

Arriving to see Lucy at five o'clock one evening, I noticed that her tiny knit cap had been cut down the center.

"Why did they do that to Lucy's cap?" I asked one of the nurses. Catherine was off duty.

"They took another brain sonogram today," she informed me.

"*Another*?" I hadn't heard of the first one, and I panicked, just as my mother would.

"You'll have to ask the doctor."

I ran down the corridor in search of Dr. Green, a large Southerner who was covering for Ian Holzman. He was talking to a resident.

"I'm Lucy Jane Wasserstein's mother," I said, panting. "Can you tell me about her brain sonogram?"

"I'm in the middle of a sentence right now," he said. Then he walked away.

With no information about Lucy, I couldn't bring myself to go back inside to the fluorescent lights, the ringing bells, and Mrs. Kaur endlessly knitting afghans for her twins. I couldn't bring myself to smile one more minute or pretend this was all just routine for me. I went home, got into bed, and cried.

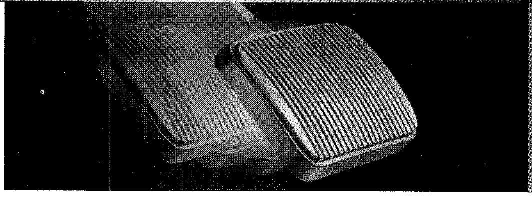
Before I returned to the N.I.C.U. in the morning, a friend called to warn me that there was a large item in a daily tabloid speculating about the identity of my child's father. During my entire hospital stay, no one had asked me about this. Now, suddenly, I felt like Hester Prynne, and my daughter, who was in intensive care with a possible brain malfunction, was fodder for gossip columns.

The next morning at the hospital, I asked Dr. Holzman about the brain sonogram. "The brain ventricles are slightly enlarged, but I wouldn't worry about it," he told me. "Most likely, she'll grow out of it. We'll follow it up next week."

I looked over at Shayna. She still had a C-PAP in her nose to aid her breathing. Her brain was doing fine, though.

By this time, Shayna and Lucy Jane were each strong enough to drink from a bottle. There wasn't enough room in the corner of the N.I.C.U. for Miss Hutchinson and me to feed our daughters at the same time, so I scheduled my visits around hers. During our time in the

"Old is when your daughter announces she's seeing a younger man."



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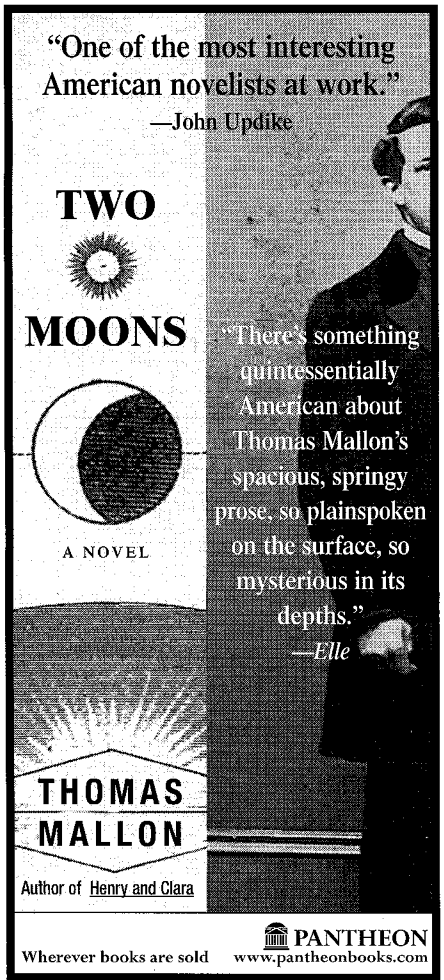

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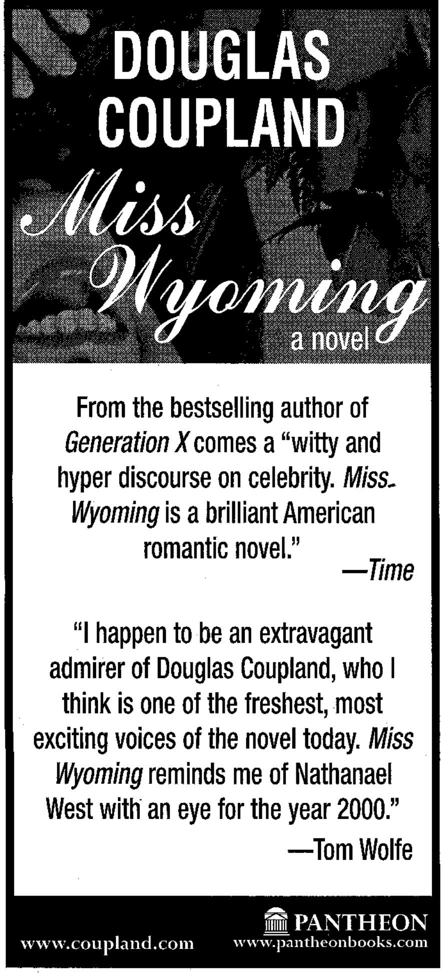

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hospital, we managed to build a neighborly friendship.

"I think Lucy and Shayna leave here in the middle of the night and go out for pizza," I said one evening, trying to lighten the mood.

"I check on Lucy whenever I see Shayna," Miss Hutchinson said, laughing for the first time. "Those Latin women over there come snooping around here, and I won't let them get near either of our babies."

I felt that, with Miss Hutchinson guarding her, Lucy Jane was the safest she would ever be.

Dr. Green interrupted me as I was feeding Lucy one night. "I want to talk to you," he said. "She had another sonogram, and the ventricles are still enlarged."

"Dr. Holzman said there was no reason to worry," I said.

"I'm just warning you. We're sending her for another sonogram tomorrow."

At 8 A.M., I stood by my daughter's Isolette. When I was a child, Lola would always kiss our *kepele* (Yiddish for "little head") before any major test. I put my hand through the porthole and touched her head. "A kiss on the *kepele*, Lucy Jane," I whispered.

After the sonogram, I ran into a young woman who had recently taken home one of her twins on a heart-and-lung monitor while the other remained in the N.I.C.U. in critical condition.

"This is a very bittersweet place," she said, touching my shoulder. "It's wonderful having my daughter home, but the other one being here is very hard." (In December, I learned that the twin in the N.I.C.U. had not survived.)

I was rocking Lucy in our corner of the N.I.C.U. when Dr. Holzman came back with the test results, beaming.

"Not a problem," he told me. "Ventricles are completely normal!" He put up his hand for a high five. I slapped him back and kissed my daughter.

During Lucy's hospital stay, my brother visited her regularly. His son Dash arrived a week after she did, and he continued to flummox the hospital staff by saying that both babies were his children. I believe that his constant presence caused my daughter to become a very early overachiever.

"She's doing great. I think she might be home before Thanksgiving," Dr. Holzman went on. "You'd better get the crib ready."

A week before Thanksgiving, Lucy Jane moved to the final, predischarge level of the N.I.C.U. We were now in the company of white professional couples who had conceived twins after taking fertility drugs. For the first time in the N.I.C.U., I felt self-conscious about being a single mother.

"Would you like to feed Lucy Jane in the nesting room?" Catherine asked me.

I took my daughter, finally unattached by wires, to a private room where parents bond with their children in the days before they leave the N.I.C.U. As I rocked her, I whispered to her, "We are so lucky!"

Gerry Gutierrez came to the N.I.C.U. on Lucy Jane's last night. Catherine reminded me to bring a car seat the next day; I was going to be one of those parents in the revolving door.

I went over to Miss Hutchinson to say goodbye. "I brought something for Shayna," I said, and handed her a package. It was a doll and a children's book I had written.

Miss Hutchinson turned away. I reached toward her and she stepped back nervously. "I feel so badly," she said. "I didn't bring anything for you."

"That's all right," I said. "Shayna was Lucy Jane's first roommate." Miss Hutchinson began to cry. It was almost time for Shayna to go home, too.

Gerry and I took a taxi down Fifth Avenue, and I noticed that the city was lit up for Christmas.

"Miss Hutchinson wins Best Supporting Actress in 'The Birth of Lucy Jane,'" Gerry said over dinner. The Best Supporting Actor award, we decided, went to Dr. Rob Phillips. (I learned a few weeks later that his group had been accepted to advise on missions to outer space. But, contrary to my phenobarbital-enhanced assumptions, he wouldn't be taking blood pressure readings on Mars; he'd be consulting from Earth.) And the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian award went to Lola Wasserstein.

James Lapine and Heidi Ettinger arrived at Mount Sinai in the morning to take Lucy Jane and me home. Catherine McCarron walked us to the door and cut off Lucy Jane's hospital bracelet, ten weeks after her birth. She gave me a kiss and said, "Once you get Lucy Jane home, you'll forget all about this place."

"No," I said. "I will never forget this place."

A week later, I was walking down the street in my neighborhood and strangers smiled at me. "How's the baby?" they asked. A concierge at the Parker Meridien hotel stopped me to say, "I think your having that baby is just great!" Suddenly, I felt as if I were in a millennial version of "It's a Wonderful Life." Hester Prynne had become the most popular girl in town.

While waiting at the East Side Women's Ob/Gyn Associates for my final post-cesarean checkup, I picked up a magazine and found an article called "Cindy Crawford, Model Mom." Cindy was back at work. On the Web, she had launched a monthly column recommending baby products. Cindy was having a ball.

Weeks earlier, Miss Hutchinson had told me, "Every night, I pray for all the children here." I began to pray for them, too. Although I remain a religious skeptic (St. James and Temple Emanu-El notwithstanding), throughout my days of awe at the Klingenstein Pavilion I had a kind of blind faith. I believed in the collaboration between the firm will of my one-pound-twelve-ounce daughter and the expertise of modern medicine. Of course, there was more than a bit of random luck involved, too.

Just after a midnight feeding recently, Lucy Jane and I settled in to watch television. An "I Love Lucy" rerun was on. It was the one where Lucy has just had a baby and Ricky rushes to the maternity ward in his voodoo costume, fresh from the Club Tropicana.

When Ricky burst into song, my daughter started to cry. She had seen a lot of things in the N.I.C.U., but she wasn't accustomed to bellowing Cuban men in feathers. I held her close—all ten pounds of her—and told her not to be frightened. Then I looked down at her double chin and her round baby cheeks. "I love Lucy, too," I told her. "And we're home." ♦

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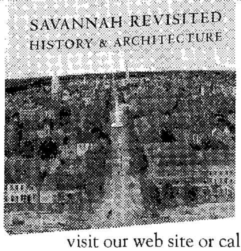

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MADAME PRESIDENT

What it takes to run a student government at a high school with troubles.

BY SUSAN ORLEAN

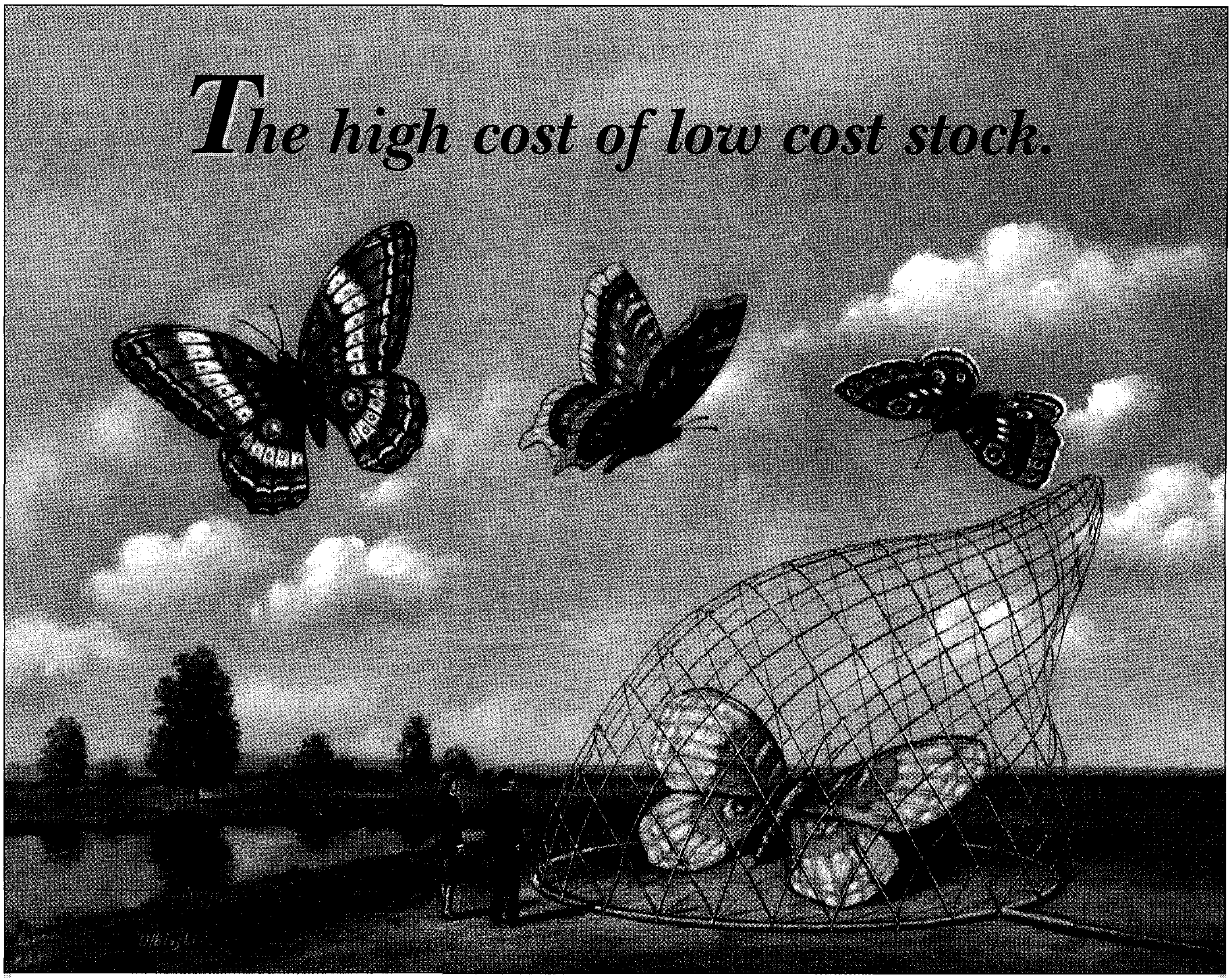
Tiffanie Lewis, the current student-body president of Martin Luther King, Jr., High School in Manhattan, wrote a campaign slogan for herself and her running mate, Crystal Belle, that went something like "If You're Not Down with Voting for Tiffanie and Crystal, Then I Have Two Words for You: Suck It." The slogan would certainly have been popular, since "Suck it" is the motto of the eminent wrestler Stone Cold Steve Austin, or maybe of the eminent wrestlers D-Generation X—at the time Tiffanie was telling me this story she couldn't remember which—and in either case it would have thrown some votes her way. But she didn't use the "Suck it" slogan. She decided that it was too rude, which is not at all what she and Crystal are like as candidates, or as people, and not at all the image they wanted to put forward in connection with Martin Luther King, Jr., High School. When you're proud of your school but know that it once had a reputation for chaos and violence, and is stuck with the nickname Horror High, you pay attention to these things. Tiffanie ended up using three other slogans. One was "Time for Some Women to Be in Charge!," which referred to the fact that all past student-body presidents of King had been male. She had also considered pointing out that she and Crystal would be the first black students to run the school in four years. But "we thought that wasn't a good approach," she says. "I mean, everyone's supposed to be united." Another slogan was "Drop the Zero and Get Down with the Heroes." This was an oblique poke at two other presidential candidates, who had academic and attendance problems and were gaining support by arguing that they were better representatives of the average, imperfect King student than Tiffanie and Crystal, who came to school and earned good grades. Tiffanie's most popular poster had a colorful background and the slogan "And You Don't Know? Vote for Tiffanie Lewis and Crystal Belle." The line "And you don't know?" was the refrain from a hit song by rapper Cam'Ron; it didn't actually mean anything, but everyone loved it.

School president Tiffanie Lewis (center) with Shakira Jones (left) and Crystal Belle in the main-floor lobby at King. Photograph by Martin Schoeller.

SABA

When Tiffanie talks about winning the election, she chokes up. "I'm a very emotional person," she says. "I don't know why, but I just am. I cry at a lot of things. I cried at 'Titanic,' and I cried at the lunar eclipse." She cried like mad when she found out that she had won the presidential election. I almost made her cry when we first met and I mistakenly wrote her name down as "Tiffany," like the jewelry store, rather than "Tiffanie." After she corrected me, I asked if people made that mistake often. "All the time," she said, sounding melancholy.

Tiffanie is not a tall person, but she has a big body and a cute, booming voice. Her face is sweet and bright and has absolutely no angles. She keeps her hair chin-length and chemically straightened and usually wears it down, but when she sweeps it up in a mini-chignon she looks regal and much older than seventeen. I spent last Christmas Day with her family, and her mother and her sisters and her aunts are all beautiful, and I got the feeling that Tiffanie grew up being told that she was good-looking, but, more important,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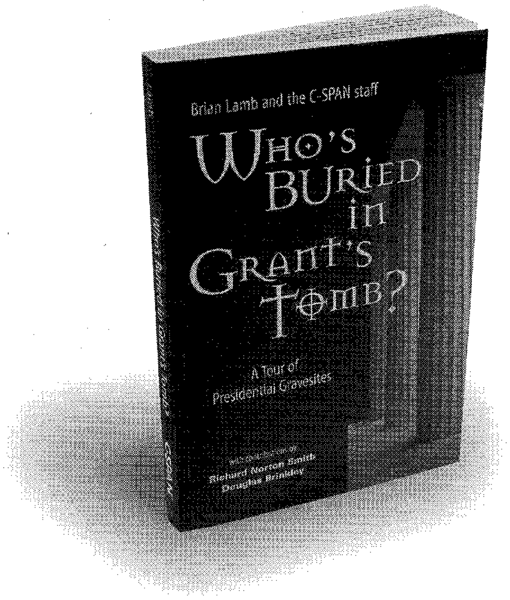
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that she was smart. Her mother, Cynthia Tillman, is a supervisor at an insurance company. Tiffanie doesn't know much about her biological father. Her stepfather, Anthony, is a store detective, but he isn't working currently. Their house in Brooklyn is the first one the Tillmans have ever owned. It is a small two-family, with a little spit of a front yard, on a tranquil side street in Canarsie, a working-class neighborhood that used to be strictly Italian and Jewish but now has a growing black population. They had been eager to leave their apartment in Crown Heights, because the building had got run-down and drugs were sold on their street.

Everything inside the Tillmans' house is gleaming and large—a large television set, a large dining table, large chairs—squeezed into smallish rooms. Tiffanie's room has an oversized black lacquer bedroom set, a computer, and very little space for anything else. Because she is president of the student body, head of the school Step Team, and is taking extra courses to prepare for her Regents' exams, Tiffanie spends very little time at home. When she is home, she is often in her room, E-mailing her friends or talking to them on the phone. A lot of her friends are boys, but she doesn't have a boyfriend, and says that this is because she doesn't have time. She says that she isn't that interested in guys right now, anyway, but the most annoyed I've ever seen her was when someone suggested that her favorite male R. & B. group was gay.

President Lewis is self-possessed, and often quite bossy, as in: "Are you-all going to help me move the tables, or are you-all going to just sit there?" (To her cabinet members, before a Student Life meeting.)

"Crystal, I really, really like you, and you know you're my home girl, but we got to get back on topic right now." (To her vice-president, who had lapsed during a meeting into a discussion about reading her poetry at the talent show.)

"First, how about you say the idea, and then we'll decide if it's bangin'." (To the chairperson of the school store, who announced that he had a really bangin' idea.)

"So you're on the seven-year plan? Let me ask you, Chickenhead: Are you proud of that?" (To a student known fa-

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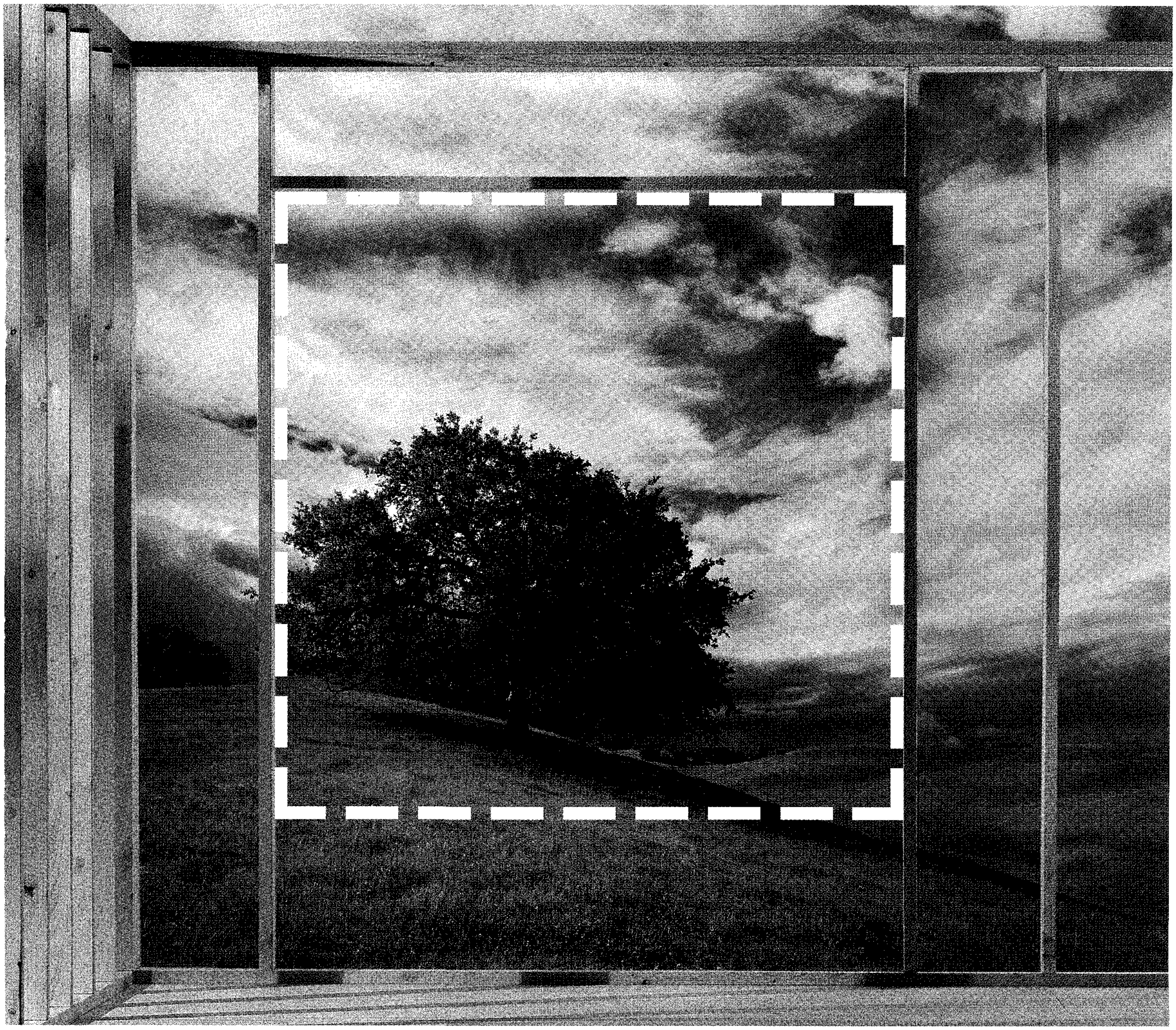

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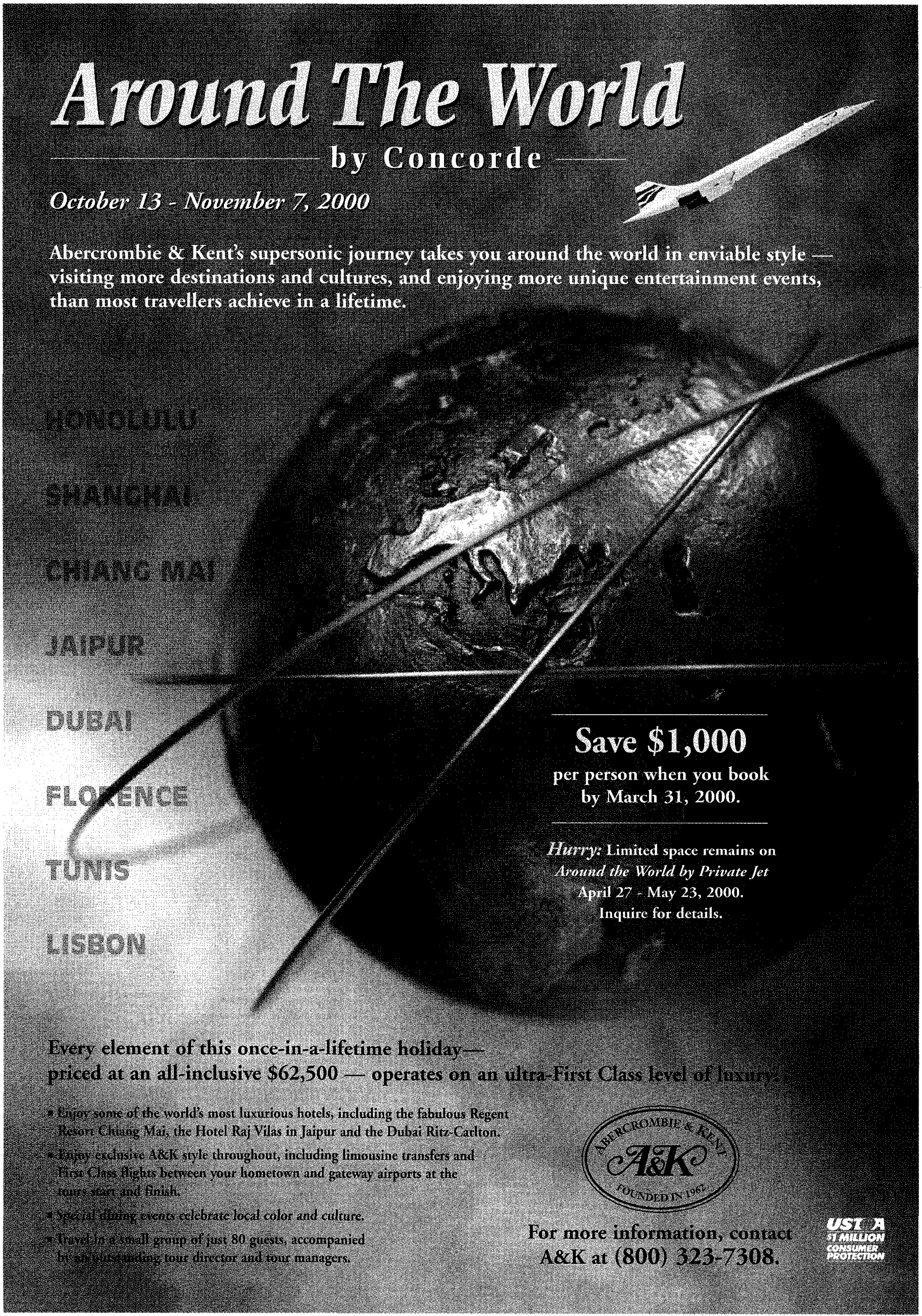

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miliarly as Chickenhead, who asserted that he knew more about King than she did, because, as he had put it, "I been at this school since before you were in eighth grade.")

One recent school day, I visited Tiffanie at the student-affairs office at King, and she told me the story of her campaign. "It was very controversial," she said. Her voice started inching up her throat. "First, my friend Wellinthon and I were going to run together, but then he decided to run with Crystal, and everyone thought Crystal should run for president, because she's such a beautiful person and everyone loves her, but she didn't want all the pressure, so then Crystal and I decided to run together, and, oh God, candidates were tearing down each other's posters and writing obscenities on them, and it just got very intense."

A young man who had been sitting nearby listening to a Walkman took off his headphones and said, "Yo, I was Tiff's campaign manager."

"Robert, you were not," Tiffanie said. "I mean, O.K., you were my manager at the end. But, first, Cherie Starling was my campaign manager. Then I had to fire her, because she was slacking." Robert frowned, and then told me that his name was Robert Benton and that he was the chairperson of the school store, and also a master rapper named Spade, and that he was available for interviews. A moment later, Cherie walked into the room. Tiffanie waved her over and said, "Hey, Cherie, remember when I fired you?" Cherie is one of her many best friends and is now the chairperson of the School Improvement Committee.

"You did?" Cherie asked. She looked puzzled.

"From my campaign, girlfriend," Tiffanie said. "Remember? You were slacking."

"Oh, yeah," Cherie answered. She shrugged her shoulders and glanced at the wall clock. "Come on, Madame President. Let's go bust it out in gym."

There are nearly three thousand students at Martin Luther King, Jr., High School, but on the best possible day fewer than three hundred of them will turn out to vote in the student-government elections. The others probably don't remember to, or don't care, or don't get around to it because of a million different reasons, like school-

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work or job work or family problems or love trouble; many of them might just assume that it doesn't matter if they vote or not. King is one of the biggest high schools in New York City. It is in a gloomy rectangular brown brick building resting on an elevated concrete deck at Amsterdam Avenue and Sixty-sixth Street—a structure that in an architectural drawing might have looked monumental but in real life looks like a giant rusting lunchbox teetering on a rock. Maybe because it is set so high above the sidewalk and so far back from the street, it is almost invisible; I had walked by it at least once a month for ten years without even noticing it. Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and the Performing Arts is right across Sixty-fifth Street, at sidewalk level. King is also within earshot of Lincoln Center, but it is more attuned to the odd, lonesome neighborhood of looming windowless buildings with sealed loading docks and metal doors to the west. The area has always been a hodgepodge. The 1955 Manhattan Land Book map shows a wide band of railroad sidings along the river, an enormous Consolidated Edison property, blocks of dinky brick row houses, a College of Pharmacy, a High School of Commerce, New York City Public School 94, and a flop called Hotel Marie Antoinette. By 1976, when Martin Luther King, Jr., High School was built on some of the Con Ed property, much of the area had been razed to make room for Lincoln Center and the American Red Cross headquarters and the eventual site of LaGuardia High.

LaGuardia is one of New York City's prestigious specialized schools: interested students have to pass a competitive audition to get in. King is a general high school. Any student in Manhattan is eligible to attend, and students from the other New York City boroughs can apply. As it happens, thousands of high-school students who live right nearby choose not to go to King—they attend private schools or other New York City public schools, including the specialized schools—and many kids at King come from far away. Tiffanie, for instance, lives an hour and a half by subway from King, but she wanted to go to high school in Manhattan rather than in Brooklyn, and heard that King had a good science program. A classmate of hers who lives an hour away, in Flatbush, told me she applied because she liked the idea of going to a school named after Reverend King. Someone else, from the Bronx, wanted to come to King because her best friend was enrolled, and a few others said they were at King because their own neighborhood schools were scary.

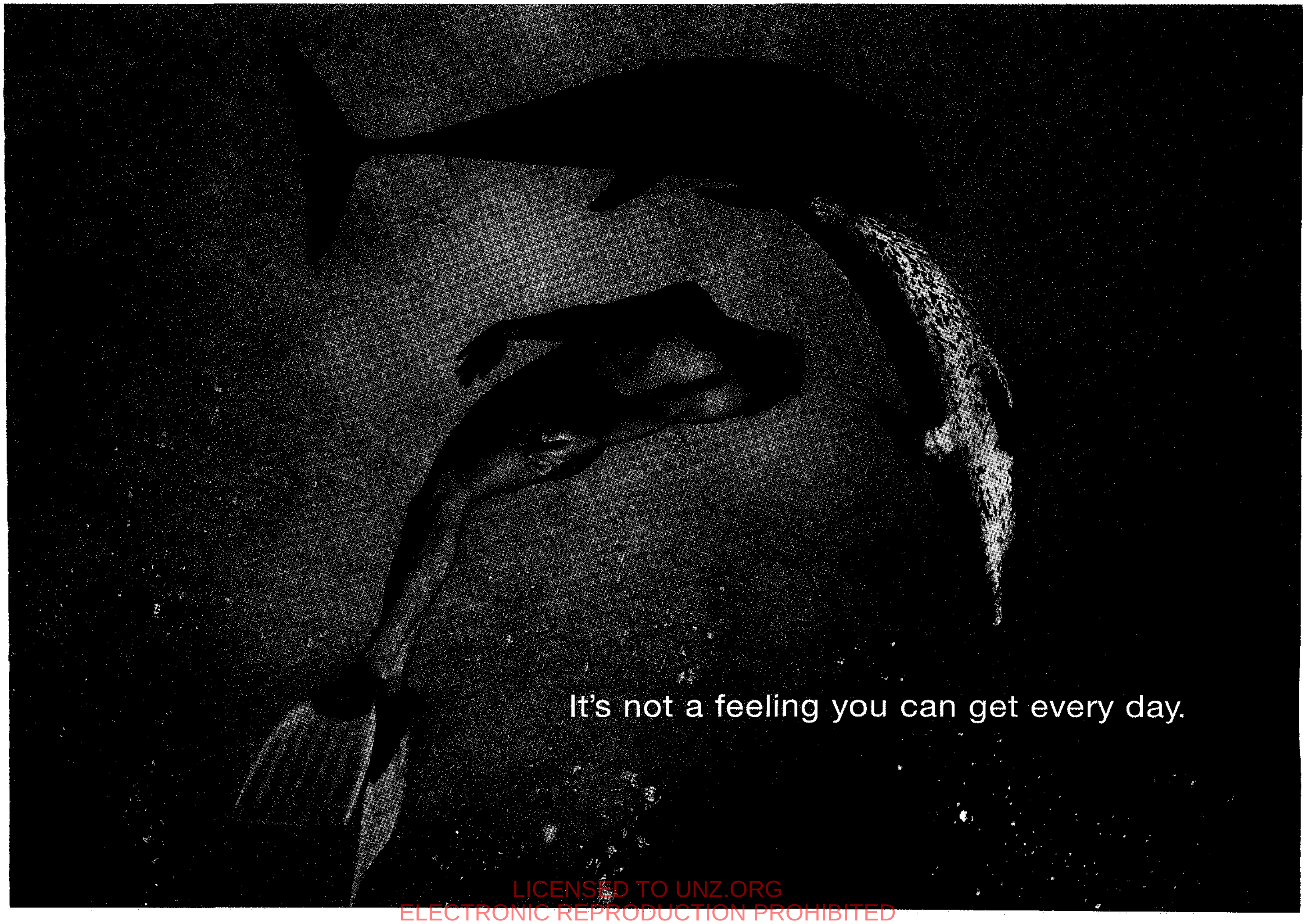
According to the most recent New York City Board of Education Annual School Report, for the 1997-98 school year, more than half the students at King are African-American, forty per cent are Hispanic, and four per cent are Asian. Only one per cent of the school's 1997-1998 student population was white—compared with fifteen per cent citywide—and Tiffanie said she didn't think there were any white students at King anymore. She did remember one from last year, a guy whose name was Lucas, and he was Polish or something like that, but definitely white.

King has never really been a lucky place. A swimming pool built as part of the gym facilities couldn't open, because of flubbed engineering. A small Martin Luther King, Jr., museum on the plaza in front of the school was shut down. There were fights, gang rumbles, declining enrollment, rumors that King students were harassing the junior ballerinas at Lincoln Center's School of American Ballet. In 1990, a student was shot in the stomach at lunchtime. In 1997, a thirteen-year-old girl was sexually assaulted in the boys' bathroom, after another female student ordered her to perform oral sex on several boys. The number of "incidents" and suspensions at King is double the citywide average. About ten years ago, King became one of the many New York City public schools to install metal detectors, and since last fall all students have been forbidden to leave the building during the day. At the same time, there are kids earning scholarships to college and outscoring students at similar schools in New York. This year, there is a popular and enthusiastic new principal, Ronald Williams Wells; and all the time there are toy drives and penny drives and bake sales, and student committees decorating the halls and the lunchroom, and there are fashion shows and cheerleader tryouts and student elections—the kinds of cheerful, innocent things that you always picture when you think about high school but that are hard to imagine when what you hear about a school makes it sound like the end of the world.

One recent Wednesday, I went to King to sit in on a student-government meeting. It was a wickedly cold, blowy day, and the big concrete plaza in front of the school was bleak and vacant. The front door creaked open. A woman walked out, followed by a dallying teen-ager in a red puffball coat. "Honey, I just want you to graduate," the mother was saying. "Please. That's all I want. Please." I found Tiffanie in her senior Economics class, taught by Mr. Borak, a wiry man with grizzled hair and rounded shoulders who has been teaching at King for twenty-three years. The class was studying free enterprise. On the chalkboard, Mr. Borak had written, "Explain the reasoning for the turnaround in the male black-white wage gap between the 1980s and the 1990s." There were about thirty students in the class; a few stared into middle space and a few were doodling in their books, but the rest were busy debating the difference between a stockholder and a shareholder. It was noisy but contained, like popcorn. At one point, a student chewing gum blew a huge bubble. "Please cancel the bubble," Mr. Borak warned. "This is an economics class. We don't want any bursting bubbles."

The weekly cabinet meeting is attended by the four student-body officers and the committee chairpeople. Today was the monthly Student Life meeting, which meant that this group was joined by the principal; the head of school security, Sergeant Murray; and an assistant principal. The meeting wasn't scheduled to start for an hour, but there were already half a dozen kids in the student-affairs room. Kiesha Lawhorne, the chairperson of the Hospitality Committee, and Shakira Jones, the student-body secretary, were working on computers along one wall; two kids were listening to a new Jay-Z CD by sharing a single set of headphones, one ear apiece. Someone else was braiding cornrows into the hair of a student. A recent graduate had also come by to visit. He introduced himself as Osiris Flores and said that he had been president of King last year and was now a freshman at Ithaca College. "Being president," he said, shaking his head slowly. "It was beautiful."

The student-government office is bright and cluttered and randomly furnished. A long white erasable calendar on the side wall listed the month's student-government-sponsored events: Pep Rally, Homecoming Game, Twin Day, Mismatch Day, Decade Day, Any Celebrity Day, and Pajama Day. After a few minutes, Tiffanie breezed in. She was wearing a DKNY T-shirt and DKNY jeans and had a couple of books in her hands. "I'm hungry," she announced. She was in a great mood because she had heard the night before that she had won a partial scholarship to Pennsylvania State University. Her other first choice for college is Spelman, a predominantly black school in Atlanta,



but getting the money for Penn State was big news.

She saw Crystal and hugged her. Crystal is a slender girl with long, glamorous eyelashes and a husky laugh. She recently was awarded a full scholarship to Middlebury College.

"Can I tell you something, Tiff?" Crystal asked. "You are just a beautiful person." Behind Crystal was Nesia Mathias, the student parliamentarian. She is another one of Tiffanie's best friends, and had been planning to drop over the day I visited Tiffanie and her family. "Sorry I didn't show up," she said. "I had to go with my daddy. He was meeting his daddy for the first time in his life. You know how that is."

"I'm hungry," Tiffanie said again.

"O.K., we ordering right this minute, Mr. President," someone said.

"Let's get on it, people," Tiffanie said. "You all are chilling and being late for the meeting, and that's mad rude."

The student being cornrowed nodded at her. "That's right, baby, you're the president," he said. "You enforce your laws."

"Don't you be braiding hair in here," Tiffanie said. "I told you, you can't be doing that in here. This is the student-government room. I'm being mean to you, but it's for a good cause."

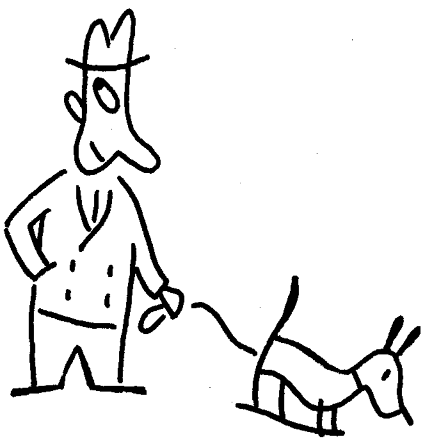
Ordering lunch became a feature of student-government meetings when King became a completely closed campus. Since students could no longer go out to get lunch, they either had to eat in the lunchroom, which was a madhouse, or they could order food from nearby restaurants and have it delivered to them at school. The restaurant delivery boys sign in with the police officer on security detail and bring the food to the kids. There was hardly a fact of contemporary New York City school life that I found more astonishing than this. Student-government officials at Martin Luther King, Jr., High School seemed to favor Chinese food, particularly chicken with broccoli and pork fried rice, and they tip modestly but not pitifully. That afternoon, they argued briefly over which of the two nearby Chinese places they should order from and then scraped together the necessary money by figuring out who was rich that day and who wasn't, and by the time that was finished the food had arrived.

Mr. Wells, the principal, strode in. He is strapping and handsome, in his early forties, and he has a glossy brown shaved head, fine features, and deep dimples. His smile is lingering and foxy. This is his twentieth year in education and his first at King. Before coming to King, he was assistant principal at Queens Gateway to Health Sciences High School, in Jamaica. He was raised in New York and went to high school in Far Rockaway, a scruffy beach community that was disintegrating while he was growing up. He never ran for student government, but he participated in a lot of school events. I once asked him which he had been most involved in, and he said that when he was a senior a girl in his class was raped and murdered and he organized a march of a majority of the student body in protest. He is extremely charming, even when he is doing uncharming things, like suspending students, which he does with some frequency. One day, I watched him cajole three sour-looking freshmen whom he was sending home for fighting. "I want you to know something," he said, looking each of them hard in the face, one at a time. "I am going to take good care of your I.D. cards while you're gone. I'm going to keep them right here with me"—he patted his chest pocket— "and I promise you I won't let anything happen to them."

"But Mr.—" one kid grumbled.

"I hear you," Mr. Wells said. The kids realized by then that they were beaten and started out of the room. "I'll be seeing you soon."

When Mr. Wells walked into the student-affairs office, everyone stopped eating. "Are we doing this, people?" he asked. "I understand there is a meeting going on here." One of the electronic things he was wearing—a walkie-talkie, a pager, and a cell phone—bleated:



"King One to Base, we're at North Four. Do you copy?"

"Copy," Mr. Wells said. He turned to Tiffanie and said, "Madame President, I have to speak to you about your attendance at gym."

"I know," she said. "But Mr. Wells—"

"But Ms. Lewis," he said.

By tradition, the student-body president runs all meetings except for the Student Life meeting, which is run by the vice-president. "The meeting is called to order," Crystal said. "The first issue on the agenda today is school unity. This is on the agenda because a lot of students are saying kids are segregated. Now, is there any way we could start a club or something so we could just talk to each other?"

One of the student representatives raised his hand. "You know, I was walking up the stairs the other day, and I saw this Spanish girl crying and I was, like, Are you all right? And she was, like, No, but thanks for asking. So I think we just got to reach out like that."

Another: "How come Asians don't come to any of the school parties and Hispanics don't come? Maybe we should hang posters about parties in more languages. How about in Chinese, too? And in French?"

Mr. Wells raised his hand.

"I'd like to recognize Mr. Wells," Crystal said.

"I would respectfully offer these suggestions," Mr. Wells said. His walkie-talkie squawked again, and both he and Sergeant Murray twiddled with their volume control, and then Sergeant Murray excused himself for a moment.

"As I was saying," Mr. Wells went on. "How about a multicultural Sadie Hawkins Day dance on Valentine's Day? By empowering females to do the interaction—that is, to invite a male from another culture to the dance—we could engender some cross-cultural contact. And how about an international-food festival?"

"Thank you very much, Mr. Wells," Crystal said solemnly. "Now, bathrooms. Every student complains about the bathrooms. There's no soap most of the time and no paper and the only bathroom open now is on the second floor, and we're wondering what is the deal?" Sergeant Murray had returned by this point. He explained that the bathrooms had to be patrolled, and he didn't have enough staff to monitor one on each floor. This was a sensitive issue, since King's most notorious recent crime, the gang rape, took place in a fifth-floor bathroom.

They next talked about something called the "sweeps"—the patrolling of the school hallways after the start of each period. Anyone caught without a pass during the sweeps is relocated for the rest of the day in the Attitude Readjustment Center, a dreary room on the lower level of the building. Now, during classes, the halls at King are deserted except for the occasional student dashing downstairs with a bathroom pass. Mr. Wells implemented ARC at the beginning of his term. It is one more partition between the kids at King who are falling away and the kids who are moving ahead. When you are in the student-affairs office, planning the Fashion Show and the Talent Show and the mini-pep rally for Martin Luther King, Jr., Week, it's as if there were no metal detectors in the lobby and no school-superintendent politics and nothing but the exigencies of being sixteen or seventeen. I asked Tiffanie how she got along with the kids at King who are always in trouble. "I don't really ever see them," she said. "They're always suspended or in ARC or something. I don't end up having much to do with them." I once stuck my head into ARC, just to see what it was like, and the pent-up annoyance and disaffection and peevishness, the teen-aged fury of the fifty or so kids inside the room, almost blew me out the door.

The president slams her gavel and then nibbles a piece of Chinese broccoli. "Meeting is called to order," she says. "First of all, Robert. So what's up with the school store?"

ROBERT: "Me and Juanita made a huge effort and cleaned it up. I still don't know what kind of stuff we're going to be selling—"

PRESIDENT: "We need to see more progress in the store. Next issue, school unity. Ibrahim, what's up?"

IBRAHIM: "We'll have Culture Day in May."

PRESIDENT: "Why is it so far away? We don't want to be waiting on this forever. Let's get on this, people."

KIESHA: "In May, I'm gonna be really concentrating on getting outta here. How about if we do another 'Be Easy' week sometime sooner? You know, when we pledge time to be easy and stay calm and love our fellow-man, like, not to yell at someone because they stepped on your sneaker."

PRESIDENT: "O.K., let's do 'Be Easy' for Dr. King's birthday. And we should change the morning announcements then, too. Make them really cool. Not real ghetto, just something cool."

ROBERT: "You should be doing them, then. You're the president."

PRESIDENT: "Well, I'm not going to lie to y'all. You all know the truth. Sometimes I'm a little late getting out the door, so sometimes I'm not here exactly on time to do the announcements."

KIESHA: "You ain't lying."

PRESIDENT: "Can I say this, people?" She pauses and looks around the room. "You know what? This is not a perfect world." ♦

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PERSONAL HISTORY

THE KING OF THE FOREST

Living with a father's demanding spirit.

BY ROGER ANGELL

Every night when I was a boy, I sat and read in our living room, listening to my father writing letters. He wrote on his lap in longhand, with the letter paper backed by one of his long yellow legal pads, and the scratch and swirl of his black Waterman pen across the page sounded like the scrabblings of a creature in the underbrush. There were no pauses or crossings out, and in time I realized that I could even identify the swoosh of a below-the-line "g" leaping diagonally upward into an "h" and the crossing double zag of an ensuing "t," and, soon after, the blip of a period. When he reached the bottom of the page, the sheet was turned over and smoothed down in a single, back-of-the-hand gesture, and the rush of writing and pages went on, while I waited for the declarative final "E" or "Ernest"—the loudest sound of all—that told me the letter was done. When the envelope had been addressed, licked, and sealed with a postmasterish thump of his fist, he would pluck a Lucky Strike out of its green pack and whack it violently four times against his thumbnail, like a man hammering a spike, then damply tongue the other end before lighting up. By the time the first deep drag appeared as a pale upward jet of smoke, another letter was in progress. I went back to my book. Sooner or later, the letters would be over, and he would be ready to read aloud to me. "Finished," he would announce, picking up "Oliver Twist." "Now, where were we?"

Friends my age—I am near the end of my seventies—tell me that they, too, often find themselves caught up in details of their childhood, but I wonder if they ever find, as I do, that they are reliving a parent's life as well as their own. My father, a New York lawyer, was lean and tall, with long fingers, brown eyes, and an air of energy about him. One of his great-grandmothers was a Seneca Indian—the Angell family had come from western New York State—and his high forehead, strong nose, and long upper lip affixed an Iroquois solemnity to his expression that he did not always feel. Handsome and dashing in the flattering, tightly cut suits and jackets of the nineteen-thirties (like Gary Cooper, he remained unstuffy in a vest), he strode swiftly, banged doors behind him, and swarmed up stairs, appearing always on the verge of some outdoor errand or expedition. Bravura came naturally to him. In Snedens Landing, a hillside enclave twenty miles upriver from New York where we sometimes passed our summers, there is a small waterfall made by a brook that splashes steeply down into a mossy and perpetually shadowed woodland pool. When I was a child, there were always large Sunday picnics there, in an adjoining pergola that looked out on the Hudson, and my father, on the slightest urging and sometimes with no urging at all, would climb up to a scary, almost invisible niche in the cliff face, nearly thirty feet above the water. He would stand there interminably—a bald, narrow Tarzan in floppy bathing trunks—and then at last launch himself out over the boulders in an elegant swan dive into the exact center of the tiny pool. I can still see the waves sloshing over the spillway as he came up, spouting and triumphant. It was a parlor trick, of a kind, and, like all parlor tricks, perhaps insufferable—except to a small son of the diver.

We stopped going to Snedens when my parents were divorced, but I remember returning to the pool with Father once when I was in my teens. He climbed up the cliff again and poised and dived, but this time I tried to talk him out of it; I was embarrassed by the whole dangerous performance. The truth was, of course, that I didn't have the nerve to try it myself, and I lacked the spirit that made it all so important to him.

It was this spirit, brought to mountain climbing, to figure skating, to tap dancing, to tennis and trout fishing, to skiing and canoeing and gardening and so forth, that sometimes inspired us in the family to call him the King of the Forest. His tennis game was thunderous but erratic, and it took years for me to realize that his real physical grace was nonsuburban. He could flick a Royal Coachman fly again and again into a backwater beneath an alder thicket twenty yards away; he knew how to carve an axe handle; and he swam, otterlike, with an oily smoothness that left no ripples. He was a terrible tap dancer, by contrast, but undauntable. Late one night in Paris (he was in his sixties), while in company with his friends the British writer V. S. Pritchett and his wife, he broke into a creaky, Gene Kellyish spatter of kicks and taps across the sidewalk and up the store shutters of a steep little side street in Montmartre. I was appalled when the Pritchetts told me about it later, but they didn't agree. "No, no," they said, laughing. "It was simply extraordinary."

Where this élan came from is a mystery, for he was not a trivial sort of person, not an entertainer. He didn't get it from his father, a slight, almost frail man, who had been crippled by childhood polio. My father didn't know him for long, in any case. Elgin Adelbert Angell was aboard the French liner La Bourgogne—one of the last North Atlantic blue-ribbon ships with masts as well as steam—which sank, en route to France on July 4, 1898, off Sable Island, southeast of Nova Scotia, after a dawn collision with a British merchant vessel, Cromartyshire, with the loss of five hundred and forty-nine lives. It was a famous marine disaster of its day. My grandfather, a Cleveland lawyer, had embarked the day before, and was looking forward to a reunion with his wife and daughter—my father's younger sister, Hildegarde—who had been in Europe for six months. The story behind this is that my grandmother had exhausted herself nursing my father through a long bout of typhoid, and had been sent abroad, on doctor's advice, to recover her health. My father, who had just turned nine, had been booked aboard La Bourgogne as well, but he came down with chicken pox and had to be left behind. Fortuitously, my grandmother's brother, Frederick Curtis, was the head of a small school for boys in Brookfield, Connecticut; my father had been enrolled there during his mother's absence, and there the disappointed patient had to remain, while his father went on alone. My father never said much about this episode in his life, but he did once tell me that his Uncle Fred, who had a long beard, used to make the rounds in his nightshirt, carrying a candle, to kiss each of the boys good night. I don't know when my father got word about La Bourgogne or how many weeks or months went by before he was reunited with his mother and sister, but this Dickensian scene is what comes to mind when I try to imagine the moment: the wavering candle held by his approaching, sadly murmuring uncle, who wakes him up for the bad news.

COURTESY ROGER ANGELL

ROGER ANGELL
REPTILES

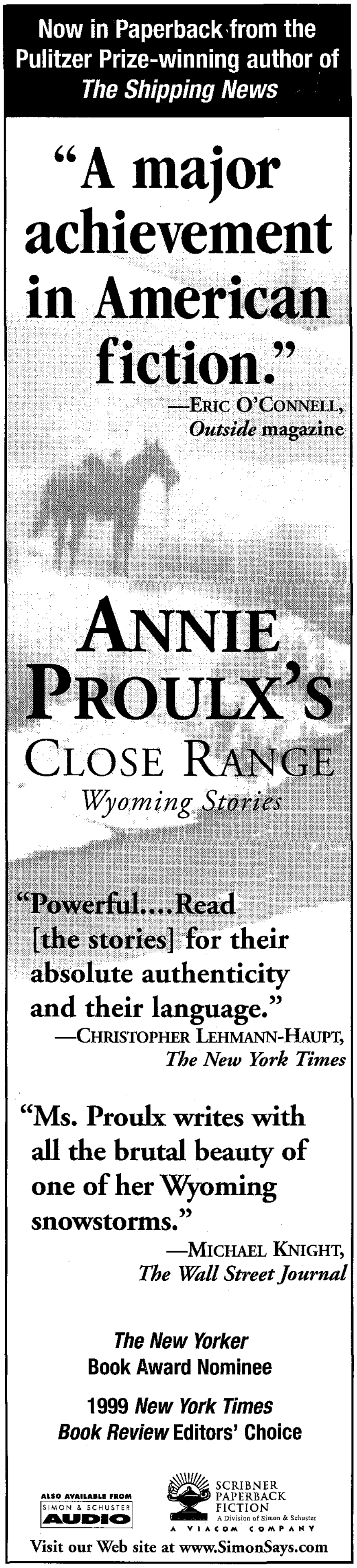
Family circle, from right: the writer and his father in 1932; his mother (in her early twenties); and the would-be herpetologist.

Ernest Angell (school friends sometimes called him Sincere Cupid) grew up in Cleveland, did well at the private University School there, and was sent off to Paris and Munich for a year of studies before entering Harvard, in 1907. A photograph of him at the time shows the stiff collar, upright carriage, and chin-up, serious gaze that we have come to associate with the optimism of those times. He took six subjects in his freshman year, including physics, German 4 (a Goethe course), Latin composition, and Greek. Somewhere along the line, he had taught himself trigonometry. He took a cold shower at seven-thirty each morning, and resolved to "make a hard try for ΦBK"—a successful one, it turned out—and strove even harder, I think, to find friends. He went out for and failed to make the *Crimson* and the freshman baseball team but got over it. He attended sermons and concerts and galleries and operas (he heard Caruso in "Il Trovatore" at the Boston Theatre); performed in a German play with the Deutsche Verein; went to dinners and dances and football games; frequently called on a Cambridge girl named Evelyn Bolles and her family; and berated himself for a generally wasted year. ("Outside of regular work I've done nothing that counts for anything," he writes in his diary on May 23, 1908.) He passed his summers at Chocorua, in the midst of the White Mountains of New Hampshire, as he had since boyhood, and here, I think, his insatiable energy brought him more happiness. He became an accomplished woodsman, bushing out new trails along the Sandwich Range, camping for days at a time along the Albany Intervale, and canoeing and fishing with the other young summer people; there are snapshots of him there in winter as well, grinning in bear-paw snowshoes. (It was in Chocorua that he met my mother, Katharine Sergeant, whom he married after he got out of Harvard Law School, in 1913.) "Ernest was easily our leading spirit," a lifelong friend of his, Stuart Chase, said many years later. "Sometimes we called him 'the Great Man.' " One summer, there was a tragedy at Chocorua, when two young Irishwomen, immigrant domestics with one of the visiting families, got into a canoe on their day off and disappeared. When they were discovered in the lake, a day or two later, my father was the one who dived down and brought up the bodies; what he remembered about it, he told me once, was that the turtles had been at them.

On one or perhaps two of those college summers, he sailed north in a schooner from Boston with Sir Wilfred Grenfell's mission to the Eskimos and fishermen along the outer Labrador coast: an odd journey, for him. I think he was impelled more by the adventure of it than by the good works. He took along a huge .45-90 rifle that I was sometimes allowed to heft when I was a kid; he'd wanted to bag a polar bear, he said, but never got off a shot. Only lately has it dawned on me that these summers may have had a purpose that he himself didn't wholly understand, and that the voyages out and back must have brought him close to the foggy cold waters where he had lost his father.

I want to bring back this sad, formidable man as he was in the early nineteen-thirties, when he and I and my older sister, Nancy, were living together in a narrow brownstone on East Ninety-third Street, with the steep front stoop of its time. We are comfortable enough there, God knows, with a succession of governesses to keep an eye on us kids, and a delightful French couple, Joseph and Edmonde Petrognani, living in the basement. Joseph does the cooking, while Edmonde, thin and beautiful, keeps house and waits on us at dinner. These are hard times, all the same. The Great Depression is deepening, and some of Father's friends who come for dinner have lost their jobs and are silent with anxiety; now and then we take in a frayed banker or architect friend for a week or two, a man who has lost his house or apartment and his savings as well, and has sent his family off somewhere while he stays in the city and looks for work. New York has taken on a shrivelled appearance; nothing is painted or shined, and the people one passes on the sidewalk move slowly, with a stunned look on their faces. Our house is mortgaged, and the time comes when Father tells Edmonde and Joseph that he's sorry, but he can no longer keep them on. They have no place to go, though, and so they stay on and, for the time being, agree to work for nothing. (Later on, he paid them back.) Our mother, Nancy's and mine, has been gone some years since. There has been a bitter divorce—in love with another man, the young writer E. B. White, she went off to Reno. My father's pride was injured, and he fought her hard, wore her down, until he won an agreement for joint custody of his children that would keep them under his roof, not hers; he swore that he would take her to court and shame her unless she agreed. A mistake all around: neither of them ever talks about this deadlock, and no wonder. Nancy and I don't talk about it, either. We go off to school together each morning on the double-decker No. 3 Fifth Avenue bus, to the lively, faintly cuckoo Lincoln School, up near Columbia; we can hardly wait for the weekends, when we visit our mother and Andy White in their happy, sunlit apartment down on Eighth Street. They have a Scottie named Daisy and a new baby, our brother Joel; there is a Ping-Pong table in one room, and the place is full of laughing, chain-smoking young writers and artists from *The New Yorker*, where they all work.

It doesn't occur to me to blame anybody for this setup, but it is plain that something has gone wrong. Nancy, graver now and more grownup, goes off to boarding school outside Boston. I am living on the top floor at Ninety-third Street, where the bathroom connects via an odd skylight airshaft to my fa-



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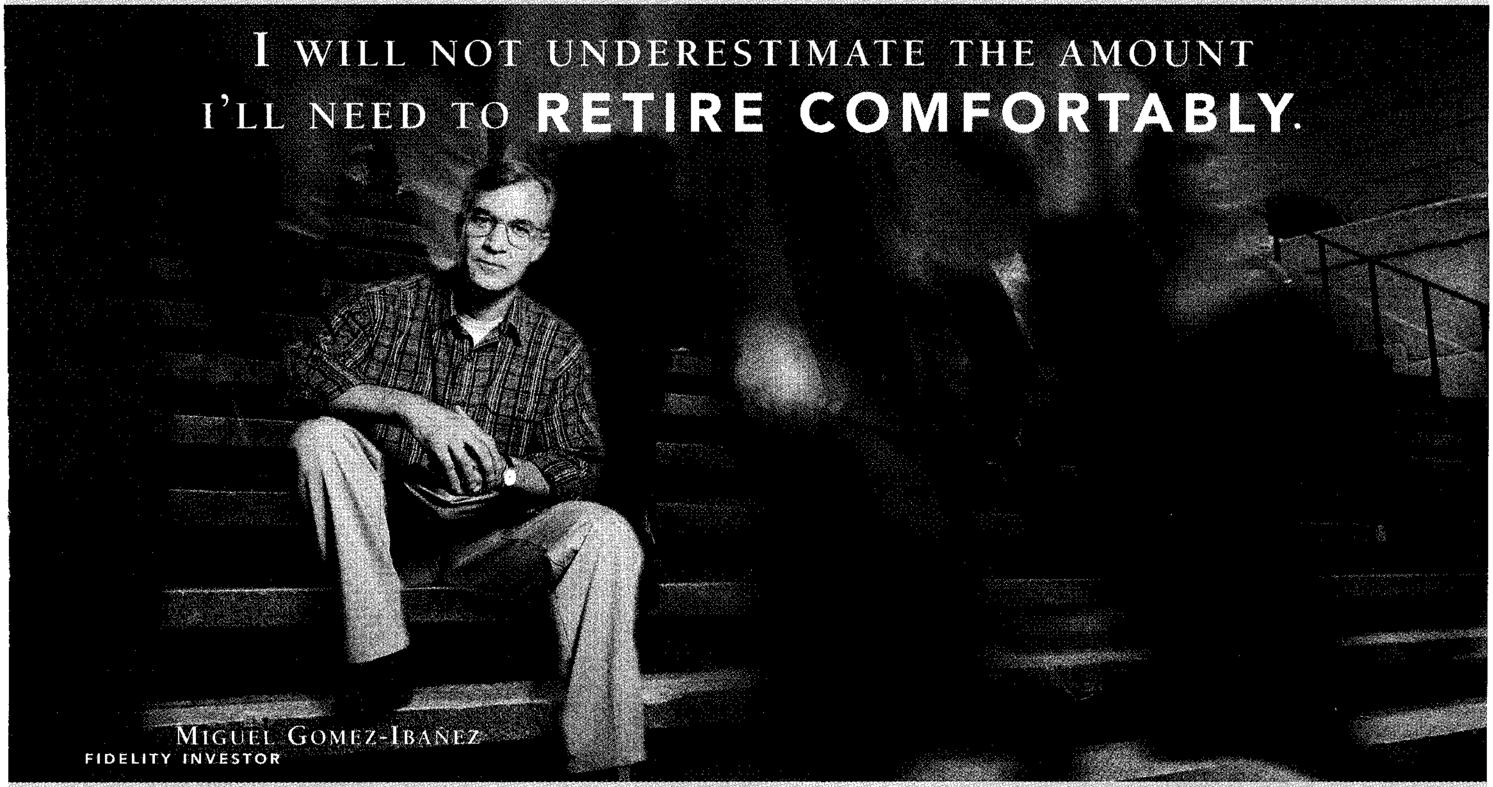
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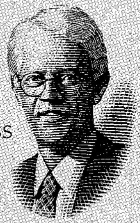

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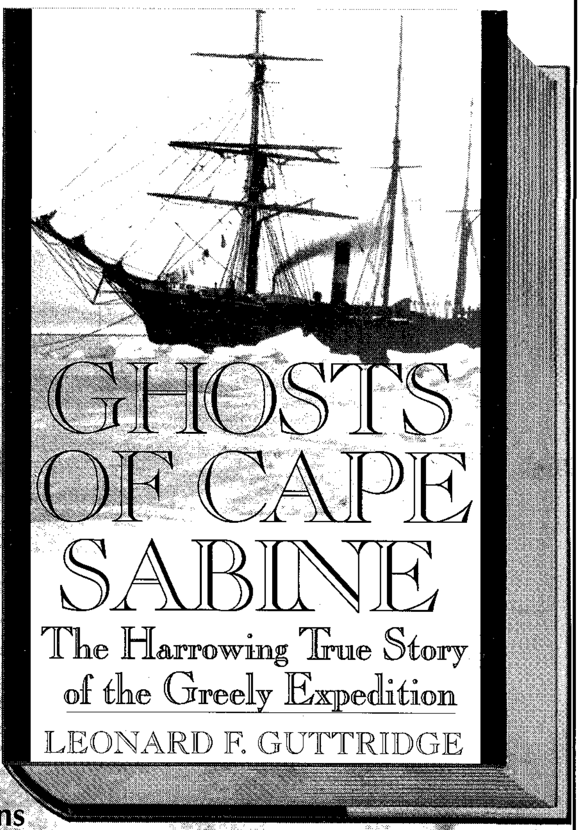
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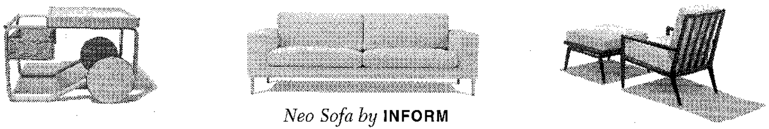
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ther's bathroom, directly below, and sometimes in the morning I silently unlatch the little window there and listen to my father talking to himself while he shaves. He mutters and exclaims under his breath. *What!* I hear, and *No, I won't!* There is a harsh, mumbled discourse—I can't make it out—and then a quieter trailing off: perhaps a more complicated thought about some law case of his. Things aren't going well downtown, I know that much. Then I hear an *If she thinks* . . . that's almost shouted: he's back on my mother again. My name turns up, too, some days: *Rog-er*, with the syllables broken in half like a stick, or *Why can't he ever* . . . I close the window.

This stuff scared me, not just because of its severity and barely suppressed anger but because Father and I were in this together now, and he was suffering in spirit. I didn't put it to myself that way, but I sensed we were in danger. I knew I was letting him down in school, where I had stopped working. My notebooks were in a hopeless mess, and I was always in trouble, often being turned in to the principal's office. I broke windows and lab objects, slid off to afternoon movies, and skipped gym. One day, I dropped some pistol cartridges from a high window onto the sidewalk below, to see if they'd go off; a couple of other times I was found in the crawl space under the auditorium, where I had smoked vile messages on the ceiling with a candle. Father was angry when news of my school malfeasances came home; veins stood out on his forehead and he shouted. Bad manners also set him off. He never whacked me but sometimes I wished he would. Instead, he sat me down and flailed me with long, lawyerly arguments about my shortcomings. "Where is your sense of responsibility?" he said. "I see no signs of it, young man. There has been no progress whatsoever." On and on he went, for twenty minutes at a stretch. He appeared barely able to contain his disappointment in me or his fears for my future. I sat in silence, waiting for it to be over, and secretly counted the detested "young man" appellations. At times these courtroom dramas took me to tears. One night, it became too much for me. "You make me want to be dead!" I burst out, and saw the shock of it turn him pale.

He stopped at once, and then it was a long time before the next lecture.

He wasn't cruel: he was scared to death. Not much was going right with him, his money was running low, and he had to borrow from his sister, Hildegarde, to keep things going; my mother, who was doing well at *The New Yorker*, paid an increasing share of the school bills for Nancy and me—a bitter blow for him. He had taken on the burdens of being a single parent—both parents, actually—with little talent for the work and no firsthand example or memory to draw upon. He had no idea what kids were like. He was winging it there for a couple of years, and it amazes me sometimes that we came through at all.

He held on. He never gave in, never succumbed to languor or self-pity, never failed to go off to work, and, except for those morning groans and curses to himself, never said a word to anyone about his fears. He sustained a formidable social life, going to dinners or a dance two or three times each week, joining friends for weekend hikes or gallery visits, and entertaining at home, where he liked to serve the illicit, Prohibition-era wine he had fermented and aged in the cellar—Château Quatre-Vingts Treize. Father was good company and attracted lively friends—among them the playwright Sidney Howard, Walter Lippmann, and the Sam Lewisohns, whose house on Fifth Avenue was stuffed with Seurats and Renoirs and Cézannes. In that smaller New York of the thirties, people saw each other often, with an intimacy not much distracted by celebrity or wealth; in the Depression particularly, they needed the comfort of talk and laughter. I couldn't take my eyes off the women, with their shining hair and glittering dresses. My father loved women, too, and sometimes one of his lady friends would still be there at the house in the morning, having coffee at the breakfast table with us before I went off to school. I wanted him to marry again; for a long time he was in love with a beautiful divorcée, with three terrific daughters, but she could never quite get over her failed marriage. Another one of his girls, Jean Simon, came up to my room with him one evening and kissed me good night after he did. He was lonely, but said so only to his sister Hildegarde—in some of those swiftly scrawled letters I saw him turn out—a writer who was living in Mexico. She was his confidante, and in those letters, which have somehow come down to me, he is less cheerful. "Lost my big case." "I'm tired as I can be—the difficulties with K, worry about finances, etc." I am in there, too: he is thinking of sending me to military school.

There is a misapprehension here, a dark crosscurrent, that still startles me. I wasn't a bad kid—I missed my mother, and I had guessed that somehow he was to blame for that, and I was lazy and careless and sometimes silly in return—but the struggle that he couldn't win or shake free of was his failed marriage, not his children. The divorce was off limits for us all, and his expression grew taut and wary if Nancy or I went on about our weekends or vacations with Mother and Andy. My mother, for her part, waited some years and then told us that it was our father's love affairs that had destroyed the marriage. He had been an intelligence officer in France in the war, and had come back after three years abroad with different ideas about sex and marriage. He had even encouraged her to try an affair of her own: they would be a modern couple. This was what had done them in, but my mother could never bring herself to say that she had left us kids behind, along with the marriage, in order to join Andy White. Her tale stopped at that point, for all her life. Parental memoirists, caught somewhere between feelings of disloyalty and the chic contemporary mode that demands that we tell all and affix damages, don't take this stuff lightly. Neither could the principals. Why else do I remember a day in the nineteen-sixties when I was having lunch with my mother at the Algonquin and she introduced me to Groucho Marx, who had stopped by our table to say hello? "A son named *Angell*?" Groucho said at once. "How did that happen?"

"Well," my mother began, "it's a long story—"

"And a sordid one, I'll wager," Groucho said. Waggling his eyebrows, he departed.

What a marriage that must have been—hers and my father's, I mean—stuffed with sex and brilliance and psychic murder, and imparting a lasting unease. Get hold of Sophocles or bring

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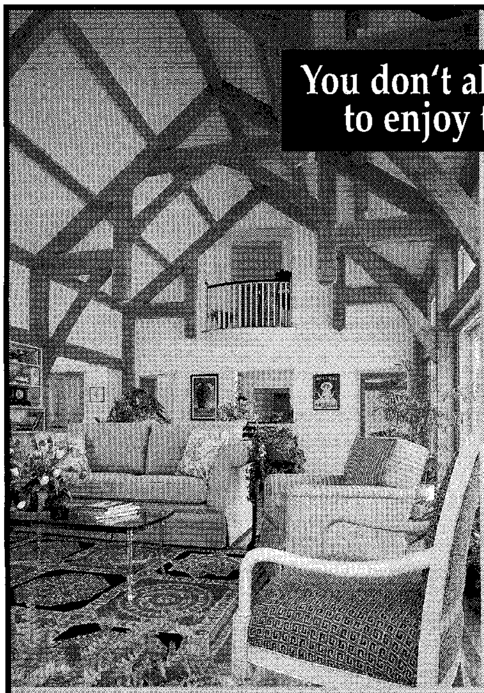
back Groucho: it's time to sweep up these bodies. Tales like this were not uncommon for people of my generation, to be sure, and have grown into cliché; what perhaps makes mine different is that the central figure, the king, for all his destructiveness and ferocity and self-doubt, turned out to be an exceptional father, with heroic energies. "Parenting" in its contemporary sense was not a concept most fathers would have understood back then, but if it was pride that first made him fight to keep his children, he then plunged right ahead with fatherhood, striding up its trail at full bore. I can scarcely remember a weekend when he and I were not off tobogganing, or taking the ferry to Staten Island, or hurrying to see the latest Diego Rivera murals, or climbing in Inwood Park, or working on my new curveball (I blew out my arm early), or stitching costumes for a marionette show I was preparing to put on, or catching the new Ed Wynn show at a matinée, or, one late-November Saturday, getting up early to drive to Yale Bowl for a famous Barry Wood–Albie Booth Harvard-Yale game. (On the way, with other friends aboard, he stopped the car unexpectedly in the middle of a covered bridge in Connecticut—there were no parkways then—forcing us all to expel the hold-your-breath wishes we were making about the game's outcome. Red-faced, we at last let go and glared at him. He laughed, but when he started up again he said, "To hell with Yale!" and then we all shouted it together.)

Summers were no different, and in his half of our vacations—we went to Maine and the Whites later on—he took Nancy and me to a ranch in Montana; to the oil fields and semi-jungles around Tampico, Mexico; to Nantucket and Chocorua; to New Mexico and the Painted Desert of Arizona; to a cattle farm in Missouri. These were inventive, unpackaged vacations, more adventurous than anything my school friends seemed to be doing in their summers, and he was our driver and guide and keeper. In Tampico, we took a trip down the brackish Laguna de Tamiahua, south of the port, hooking passage on an ancient, lifeboat-size ferry that was towed all through that memorable night behind a larger vessel loaded with pigs. Another day, Father and I



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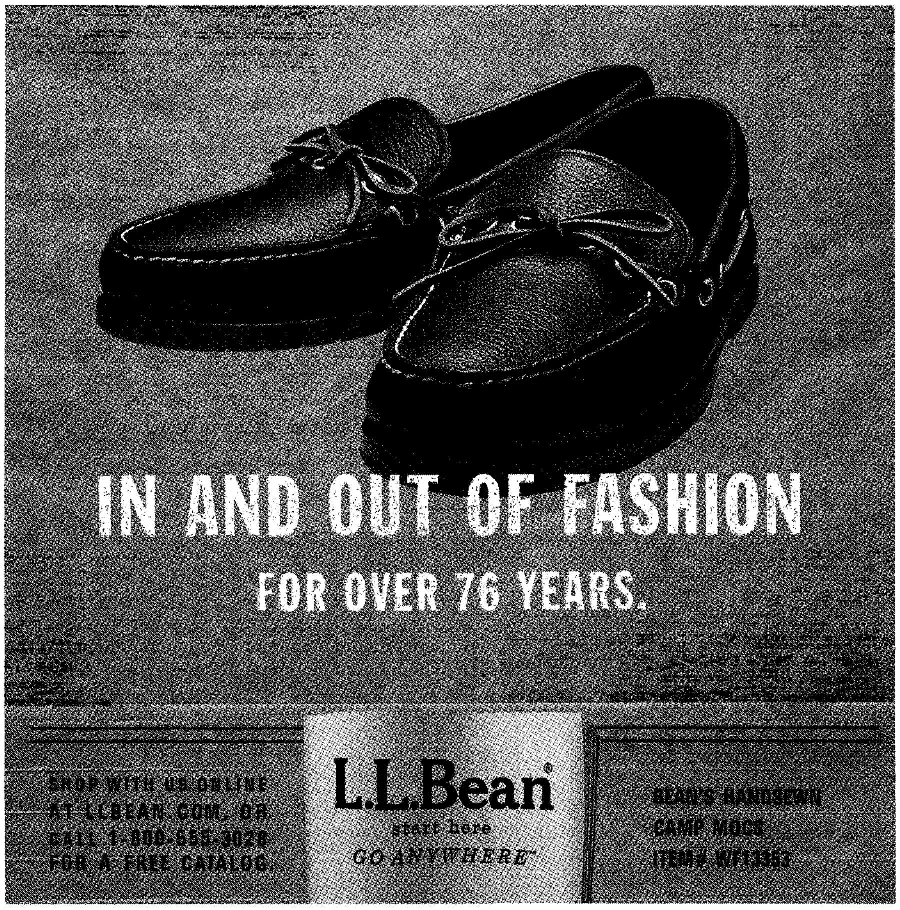

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got aboard a narrow-gauge, gasoline-powered train that putted us twenty-five miles inland to Pánuco, an oil town that dated back to Cortés's time. A couple of armed soldiers lounged on the platform of our crowded car, protecting us against bandits; it was the rainy season, and for most of the distance we swished our way through a lake of drowned trees, leaving a widening wake astern. That night, I saw a corpse being carried along on a shutter, just across the street, and went to my first prizefight, up onstage at the local theatre. When "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre" came along, seventeen years later, I knew they'd got the local color right.

Every book I read back then, and every sudden passion I developed, elicited Father's curiosity and support. After I determined that I would become a naturalist when I grew up, our house filled up with fish tanks and snakes and horned toads, mice (to feed the snakes), a coatimundi that we picked up on the trip to Mexico, and then a fiercely biting macaque given to me by my mother's friend Emily Hahn. "Interesting, let's see," my father said of each proposed further addition, and that night or the next he would sit down with me as I pored over the catalogue from the Ross Allen Reptile Institute, in Silver Springs, Florida, while, counting up my allowance, I selected the next specimen. Then he would go downstairs to prepare Joseph and Edmonde for another creature under our roof.

What lightened us up for good was Father's sudden notion, in the autumn of 1931, of finding a young Columbia student to come by late in the afternoons to provide me with some company until he got home from the office. (At eleven, I had outlasted the final governess.) Arthur (Tex) Goldschmidt turned up for the job—a slight, smiling political-economy major from San Antonio, with a slant of blond hair across his forehead, and fingers stained yellow by his incessant Chesterfields, and after Father caught my eye he asked him to stay on for dinner. This was a good thing, Tex confessed later, because he was flat broke. Soon Tex's hours had expanded to four nights a week; within a few months, he had moved in with us for good. Tex taught

TAKES

I was perhaps twenty-three when I first ate almost enough caviar—not to mention any caviar at all that I can now remember. It was one of the best, brightest days of my whole life with my parents, and lunching in the quiet back room at the Café de la Paix was only a part of the luminous whole. My mother ate fresh foie gras, sternly forbidden to her liver, but she loved the cathedral at Strasbourg enough to risk almost any kind of attack, and this truffled slab was so plainly the best of her lifetime that we all agreed it could do her nothing but good, which it did. My father and I ate caviar, probably Sevruga, with green-black smallish beads and a superb challenge of flavor for the iced grassy vodka we used to cleanse our happy palates. We ate three portions apiece, tacitly knowing it could never happen again that anything would be quite so mysteriously perfect in both time and space. The headwaiter sensed all this, which is, of course, why he was world-known, and the portions got larger, and at our third blissful command he simply put the tin in its ice bowl upon our table. It was a regal gesture, like being tapped on the shoulder with a sword. We bowed, served ourselves exactly as he would have done, grain for grain, and had no need for any more. It was reward enough to sit in the almost empty room, chaste rococo in the slanting June sunlight, with the generous tub of pure delight between us, Mother purring there, the vodka seeping slyly through our veins, and real wood strawberries to come, to make us feel like children again and not near-gods. That was a fine introduction to what I hope is a reasonably long life of such occasional bliss.

RICHARD MERKIN

—M.F. K. Fisher
"Gastronomy Recalled: Once a Tramp, Always...," September 7, 1968

me a rackety, blindfolded, down-on-your-knees game called Calf Rope, in which you bashed your opponents with a rolled-up newspaper. He asked me about my school girlfriends and named one of them Betty Boop. He got me reading *The New Republic* and *New Masses*, and took me to see grainy Sergei Eisenstein films, on Fourteenth Street. Observing the pantings and fartings of our old Boston terrier Tunney one day, he proposed that the federal government should fund a plan like the Passamaquoddy Bay project that would put all this energy to some use. When word came back from Lincoln that I was being viewed as the worst head of student government in the history of the elementary school (the job was handed out by rote, not merit), Tex said, "Wow, and you weren't even *trying!*"

Tex saved my life, and perhaps he did more than that for Father. The product of a family of idealistic German intellectuals, Tex fired up my father's rather distant liberalism, brought professors and journalists he knew to dinner, and got us talking about Tammany Hall and the Reichstag fire and the Scottsboro boys and subsistence gardens for the unemployed. Tex was a leader of a Columbia student strike over the university's expulsion of the editor of the *Spectator*, and the next day at breakfast we excitedly passed around the *Herald Tribune*, with a heroic photograph of him addressing a crowd from the base of the Alma Mater statue while being pelted with eggs. (He insisted that I take part in all this fervor and discussion, and within weeks had converted me into the junior op-ed voice at the dinner table, and a major pain in the neck.) When Tex came back from a week's visit to the bloody mine strike in Harlan County, Kentucky, my father gave him a watch and a dinner party. He and my father shaved together each morning, after I'd gone to school, and talked politics and ideas and books, which is to say that Father had stopped talking to himself, except on weekends. He trusted Tex in everything, and let him take me along in our old Franklin sedan for local and long-distance trips. When Tex and I went to Detroit by bus in March of 1933 to pick up a new car, an Essex, that Father had wangled at a very low price from an advertising friend, we found that all the banks had closed down and the city was running on scrip, not U.S. currency. The New Deal was at hand.

"Ideally, husbands should be spaced at least three years apart."

Evenings at Ninety-third Street have kept their zing. The candles are lit, people are here for dinner, and Tex has once again brought along his friend and mentor Joseph D. McGoldrick—a rotund, pink-haired professor of government, with glasses slipping down his nose, who would soon become New York City Comptroller under Fiorello LaGuardia. Joseph (the other Joseph) has given us crêpes Suzette for dessert, and after dinner, up in the library—where my four-and-a-half-foot king snake Humphrey, the very Mona Lisa of my collection, is oozing his way contentedly along behind the blue Conrad volumes—we'll play the new game that's all the rage with university faculties. Like everyone else just then, Tex and I have laid out our own board on easel paper, with ruled-in squares, made-up corporate names, and hand-scissored strips of money, and tonight, as before, Joe McGoldrick will be the first player in the room to go broke. Maybe this game, Monopoly, as yet unpatented, will catch on someday.

I'm not sure if Tex was at the house on a snowy night in the winter of 1933 when my father asked a few men friends in for drinks before a Roman Revel masquerade party at the Century Club. Observing that each of them had managed no more than the predictable bedsheet toga and paper-laurel crown, I said to Father, "Why don't you dress up like Cleopatra and take Humphrey along with you?" The suggestion came half-way into the second round of Martinis and was acted upon at once. Lady friends of my father were consulted by telephone, and quickly rallied round with filmy garments and makeup. I remember gilding the paternal toes with poster paint. In no time, the startling drag was complete, and Father, wrapping Humphrey around one arm, slipped into his overcoat and departed for Rome with his entourage. He had a thin time of it there, it turned out, discovering to his amazement that not many fellow-members among the dis-

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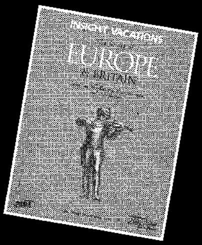

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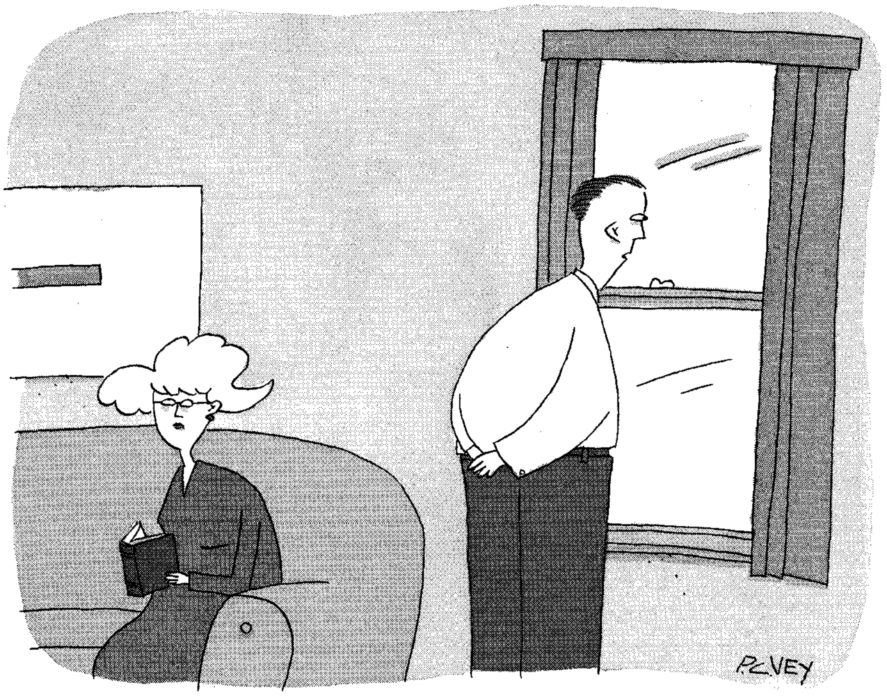

"That dead person is still on our lawn."

tinguished group shared his happiness and adventurous interest in partying in first-class reptilian company. " 'My God, it's *alive!*' " he said the next morning, imitating, for my delight, his clubmates' squeamish noises and unherpetological departing scuttle.

After Tex finished his graduate work at Columbia, and got married and went off to work for the New Deal—he became a noted Department of the Interior specialist in water development and environmental protection—he told friends of his that it was my father's trust and fairness of mind that had probably kept him from joining the Communist Party in those anxious times. And my father, in a letter to Tex's parents, said that he liked him better than any young person he knew and had come to think of him as a combination son and brother. Tex, laughing with me years later, said, "Of course, it was just like him not to tell *me* that he'd done such a thing."

This account, a boy's view, has not offered much about my father's other self—his politics, say, which he took seriously. He busied himself within the American Civil Liberties Union and the Foreign Policy Association, and sopped up all the weightier weekly and quarterly journals. (Well, almost all: unopened copies of the weekly Manchester *Guardian,* in their yellowish wrappers, tended to pile up under a table in the living room and would only later be taken out, ripped open, and absorbed over a giant weekend cram course.) Father voted for the Socialist Norman Thomas in 1932 as a protest against the hopeless Hoover and the lightweight Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then underwent something of a conversion to the New Deal. But F.D.R.'s maneuverings with the Constitution meant another crisis of principles for my old man, and a second Norman Thomas gesture in 1936. His real affiliation was for fairness. As a member of the liberal Willard Straight Post, which unsurprisingly got itself thrown out of the American Legion after much public opposition to that staid body's patriotic and isolationist lobbyings, he happily led a legal battle that went to the New York State Supreme Court and brought vindication and reinstatement. I'm not sure he ever went to another meeting.

I have slighted my mother, whose

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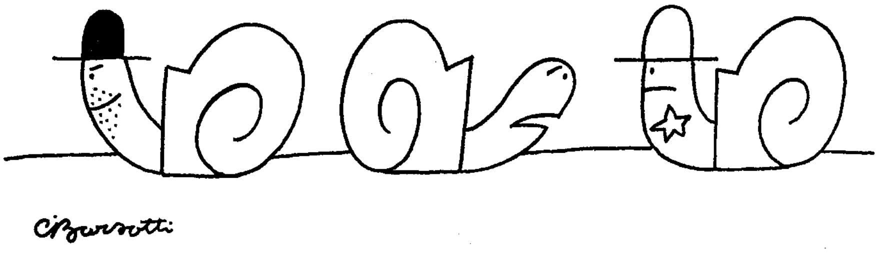
emotional and professional attachment to *The New Yorker* drew me inexorably toward writing and editing and, in time, to the magazine itself. The choice was an easy one for me, because my father never murmured or hinted that I had let him down in some fashion by joining the Whites' family firm, so to speak. It was quite the contrary. In 1950, I wrote a story called "Tennis," a work of fiction, thinly veiled, that drew heavily on the struggles I was still experiencing in beating Father at singles. In the story, the narrator, a man named Minot, is rebuked by his wife for pouting and carrying on when his more spectacular father takes him again, on his court in New Jersey. Later in the story, the senior player suffers a courtside heart attack but survives, leaving the two men to wonder what they've been doing to the game all this time. I ran this effort past my father, in manuscript, who saw the connection, of course, but insisted that it should be submitted unchanged. When it came out in *The New Yorker*, he called to tell me how proud he was, and added that a few friends of his had already been in touch with him to protest my perfidy. "I can't believe it," he said. "Can't they see it's a *story*? Can't they see how good it is?" Four or five years after this, almost inevitably, after my father and I had been playing Sunday doubles together at his friend Stuart Chase's court in Redding, he complained in the car of a heaviness and some twinges in his chest: a full-blown coronary, it turned out. When we got home to his weekend place nearby, I called his doctor, who said he'd send over a local man he knew and that he was ordering an ambulance from Danbury. My father waited calmly enough, lying out on an old Victorian sofa in his tennis whites, and at last I said, "This is weird, isn't it?"

"I've been thinking that, too," he said, with a little gleam of pleasure.

"Just remember the script," I said. "If you die now, I'll never forgive you."

"O.K.," he said, "I won't die." And he didn't—not for a long time.

I have passed over the whole latter half of my father's life, which brought him a happy second marriage, financial and social comfort, a twin son and daughter, and some honors at the end. (He was, among other things, an almost perpetual chairman of the board of the A.C.L.U., and served as well at International Commission of Jurists meetings in Athens and New Delhi.) None of Father's other children share the view of him that I have offered. Nancy found it harder to forgive the harsh terms of that long-ago divorce and the worrying sort of love that came from our guilt-worn mother. The twins, Abby and Christopher, recall a father who was too old for the job—he was fifty-five when they were born—and too willing to hand the work over to others. Quite by chance, I had the best of him, and it was by luck that I had final word of him, a year or two ago, almost a quarter century after his



"He's long gone, sheriff—you'll never catch him."

death, when a woman I didn't know sent me a clipping from the August, 1903, issue of *St. Nicholas* magazine. Both of my parents had grown up reading this famous children's monthly, and both of them had been contributors to the "St. Nicholas League," a popular feature that ran poems and stories and drawings and photographs by young subscribers. The clip that was marked for me—I have no idea how my correspondent knew the connection—was called "Polly's Fourth (A True Story)," with the byline "by Ernest Angell (Age 13)." It begins briskly: "One 29th of June found Polly Stewart and her parents in the city of Montreal. Late that evening they took a steamer en route for England, sailing early the next morning." The story goes on, in unadorned prose, to describe the wonders of the "ever-widening St. Lawrence" and the option that liners had in summertime of steaming north of Newfoundland, instead of taking the longer southern route. Polly's vessel goes north, and passes the Strait of Belle Isle. But "when Polly awoke the next morning the engines were still and silence reigned. . . . The steamer was inclosed by ice stretching as far as the eye could reach, tumbled, irregular, of a pale green color!" The vessel lies motionless in this dangerous situation, "save when the ice parted a little around the boat, showing the black water. . . . Of course the weather was bitterly cold." The next day, the ship moves more freely, drawing clear of the floes, although it is learned that during the night it grazed a large iceberg. "The rest of the voyage was uneventful, and the Stewarts arrived in due time at Liverpool. But that Fourth in the ice Polly will never forget."

Neither had my father forgotten, for the journey he writes, with its proper date, takes his father's boat north of Newfoundland, rather than on the fatal course to the south, and he steers its passengers and crew safely home at last. I can't get this brusque tale out of my mind, or account for the audacity of its author. He has rewritten the worst moments of his life, and, at whatever price, put them behind him. At thirteen, he is on his own, and ready for all of us who await him eagerly up the line. ♦

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FICTION

ATTENTION GENIUSES: CASH ONLY

BY WOODY ALLEN

Jogging along Fifth Avenue last summer as part of a fitness program designed to reduce my life expectancy to that of a nineteenth-century coal miner, I paused at the outdoor café of the Stanhope Hotel to renovate my flagging respiratory system with a chilled Screwdriver. Orange juice being well up on my prescribed regimen, I quaffed several rounds and upon rising managed to execute a series of corybantic figures, not unlike the infant Bambi taking his first steps.

Recalling dimly through a cortex richly marinated by the Smirnoff people that I had committed to picking up a ration of goat-cheese buttons and some Holland rusk en route home, I stumbled numbly into the Metropolitan Museum, mistaking it for Zabar's. As I lurched down the halls, my head spinning like a zoetrope, I gradually regained sufficient lucidity to realize that I was bearing witness to an exhibition, "Cézanne to van Gogh: The Collection of Doctor Gachet."

Gachet, I garnered from the wall spiel, was a physician who treated the likes of Pissarro and van Gogh when these lads were under the weather after ingesting an unripe frog's leg or belting back too much absinthe. As yet unrecognized and unable to pay a sou, they offered to balance Gachet's books with an oil or pastel in exchange for a house call or a dose of mercury. Gachet's willingness to accept proved clairvoyant, and as I luxuriated in the agglomeration of Renoirs and Cézannes, presumably direct from the walls of his waiting room, I couldn't help imagining myself in a similar situation.

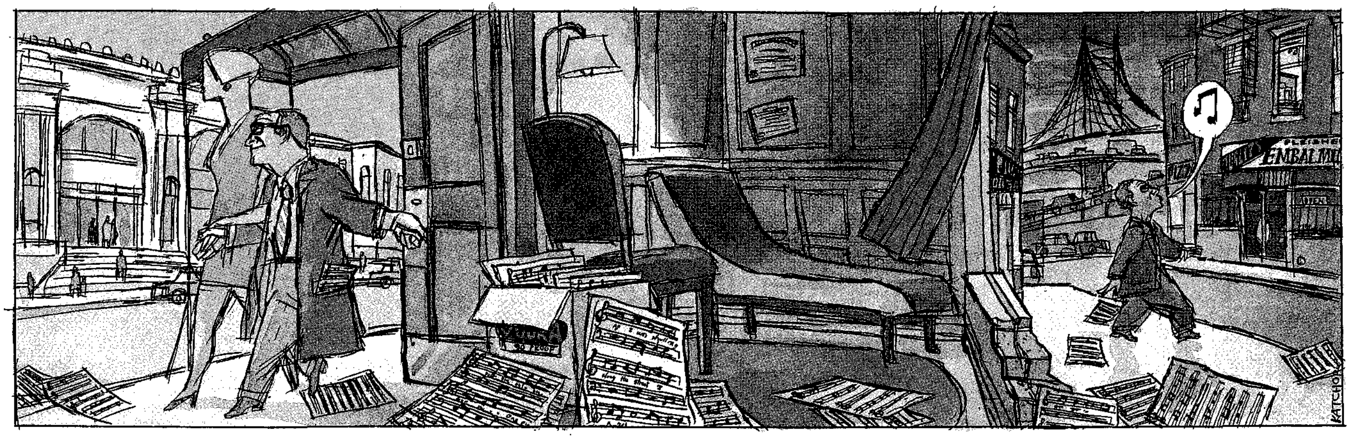
Dec. 1st: Quelle good fortune! That I, Dr. Skeezix Feebleman, have received a referral today from none other than Noah Untermensch, a genius among psychoanalysts who specializes in the problems of the creative mind. Untermensch has amassed a prestigious show-business clientele rivalled only by the "Available List" at the William Morris Agency.

"This kid Pepkin's a songwriter," Dr. Untermensch told me over the phone as he greased the skids for a meeting with the prospective patient. "He's Jerry Kern or Cole Porter, but modern-day. Problem is the kid's awash in debilitating guilt. My best guess? It's a mother thing. Candle his sconce for a while and sluice off some angst. You won't be sorry, I see Tonys, Oscars, Grammys, maybe even a Medal of Freedom."

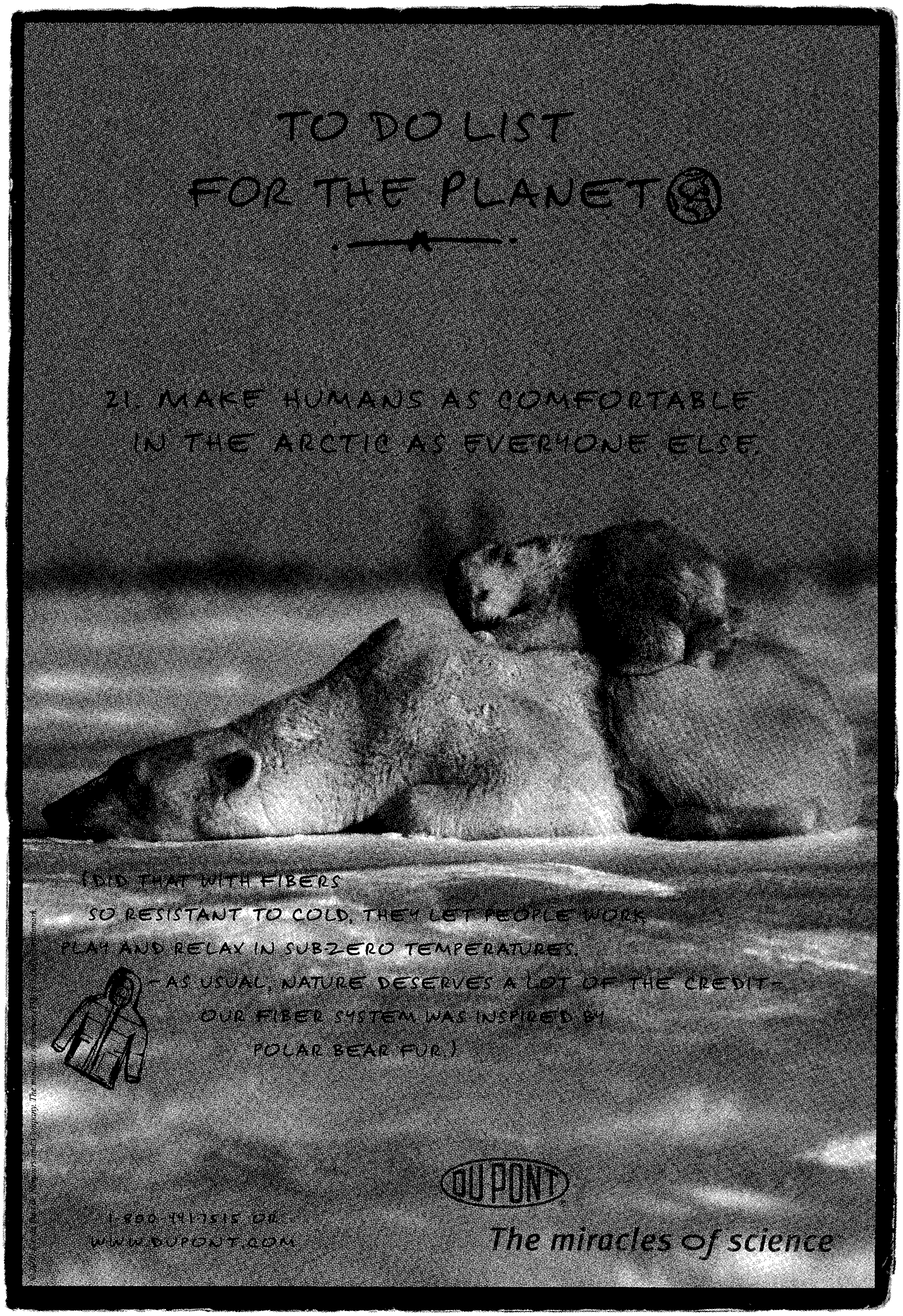
I asked Untermensch why he wasn't going to treat Pepkin himself. "Plate's full," he snapped, "and all analytic emergencies. Actress whose co-op won't let dogs in, TV weatherman into paddling, plus a producer who can't get a call back from Mike Eisner. Him I placed on suicide watch. Anyway, do your best and no need to keep me informed about your progress. You get final cut. Ha, ha."

Dec. 3rd: Met Murray Pepkin today and there's no question about it, the man has artist written all over him. Bushy-haired and with eyes like hypnodisks, he is the rarefied man obsessed with his work yet lumbered on all sides by the pygmy demands of food, rent, and two alimonies. As a songwriter, Pepkin appears to be a visionary who chooses to hone his lyrics in a spare room in Queens above Fleisher Brothers Quality Embalming, where he sometimes serves as a makeup consultant. I asked him why he believes he needs analysis, and he confessed that, while the reality is that each note and syllable he pens vibrates with genuine greatness, he feels he's too self-critical. He recognizes his relentless self-destructive choices in women and was recently married to an actress in a relationship based not so much on traditional Western ethics as on Hammurabi's Code. Shortly after, he discovered her in bed with their nutritionist. They quarrelled, and she struck Pepkin in the head with his rhyming dictionary, causing him to forget the bridge to "Dry Bones."

When I brought up my fee, Pepkin allowed sheepishly that at the moment he is a bit strapped, having squandered the last of his savings on a duck press. He wondered if we might not arrange some form of installment plan. When I explained that financial obligation was crucial to the treatment itself, he came up with the idea that he might pay me off in songs, pointing out how remunerative it would have been over the years if I alone held the copyright to "Begin the Beguine" or "Send In the Clowns." Not only would the royalties from his sheet



BEN KATCHOR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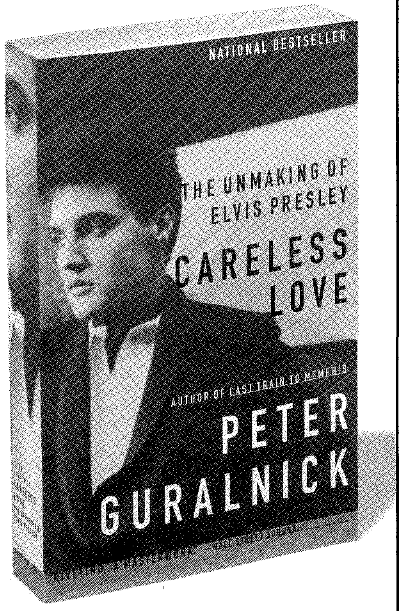
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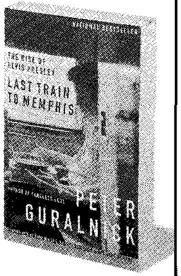

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music in time swell my personal coffers but I would be lauded the world over as having nurtured a fledgling tunesmith equal to Gershwin, the Beatles, or Marvin Hamlisch. Having always prided myself on a keen eye for budding talent, and recalling how amply rewarded some old French homeopath named Cachet or Kashay had been writing prescriptions for van Gogh in exchange for an occasional still-life to cover the cost of his tongue depressors, I warmed to Pepkin's offer. I also reviewed my own financial obligations, which have puffed recently like a hammered thumb. There was the apartment on Park Avenue, the beach house in Quogue, the two Ferraris, and Foxy Breitbart, an expensive little habit I picked up one night trolling the singles bars, whose skin tones in a thong put a smile on my face that could only be chipped off with a chisel. Add to this a too heavy position in Lebanese guavas and my cash flow seemed a shade coagulated. And yet a voice somewhere within asserted that a flyer with this tightly wound mainspring sprawled before me not only might prove an annuity but, should Hollywood one day make his life story, the role of Skeezix Feebleman could just cop Best Supporting Actor.

May 2nd: It has been six months today that I have been treating Murray Pepkin, and though my faith in his genius abides undiminished, I must say I did not realize the amount of work involved. Last week he rang me at 3 A.M. to tell me a long dream in which Rodgers and Hart appeared at his window as parrots and Simonized his car. Some days later he paged me at the opera and threatened to take his life if I did not immediately drive to meet him at Umberto's Clam House and hear his idea for a musical based on the Dewey decimal system. I put up with it out of deference to his gifts, which I alone seem to recognize. He has given me, over the last half year, a kilo of songs, some composed hastily on napkins, and although none have as yet found succor at a publishing house, he insists each will in time be a classic. One is a sophisticated bauble called "If You'll Be My Puma in Yuma I'll Be Your Stork in New York." It's best crooned, and is replete with clever double entendres. "Molting Time," by contrast, is a mournful air not unlike the Irish masterpiece "Danny Boy." I agree with Pepkin that only a tenor of genius could do it justice. A beautiful love song Pepkin also guarantees me will eventually top the charts is "My Lips Will Be a Little Late This Year," which boasts the bittersweet lyric "Embrace me, disgrace me, just don't erase me from your Rolodex." For lagniappe in this delightful salmagundi, Pepkin included "Stout-Hearted Mice," which, he assures me, is the kind of patriotic morale-builder that, in the event of all-out nuclear war, will glean for me beaucoup jack. Still, a little of the ready for my Herculean efforts would come in handy, what with Foxy, to whom I am engaged, dropping mail-fisted hints regarding a floor-length winter garment in the marten family.

June 10th: I am experiencing some professional problems, which I realize for the "hands on" type of shrink I am is par for the course, and yet to sustain a subdural hematoma the size of a Burnkhorst knockwurst I feel is over the top. The other night, while fast asleep after an arduous day of psychoanalysis, I got a frantic call from Pepkin's wife. At the moment we were speaking she was holding Pepkin at bay with Mace. Apparently she had been critical of his new torch song, "A Side Order of Heartache, Please," suggesting it could be used as a good way to break in their new paper shredder. Realizing what tabloid banner lines top-billing Feebleman could do to a discreet practice should I alert the fuzz, I bolted from my apartment in my underwear and sped possessed over the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge. Arriving at Pepkin's, I found husband and wife feinting around the kitchen table, each trying to gain purchase for a strike. Magda Pepkin gripped a spray can, Pepkin a souvenir he had gotten free on Bat Day at Shea Stadium.

Convinced that a firm tone was needed, I stepped between the two and cleared my throat dramatically just as Pepkin swung the bat at his wife, cracking my head with the sound of a base-clearing triple. I staggered forward, smiling unmotivatedly at what I imagined to be Alpha Centauri, and recall being taken to the local hospital emergency ward, where I was instantly rushed to the Intensive Apathy Unit.

As for recompense for what one col-

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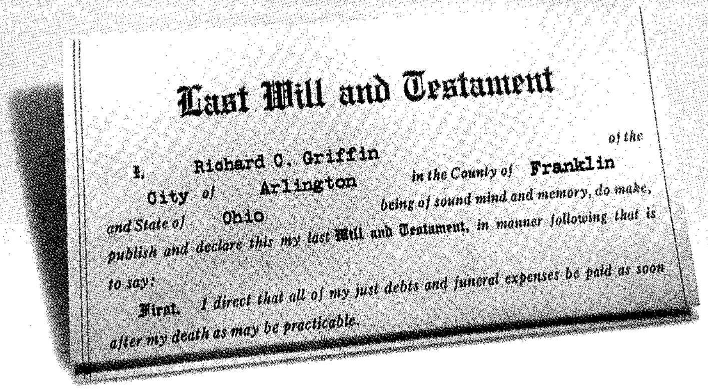

Last Will and Testament

I, Richard C. Griffin of the City of Arlington in the County of Franklin and State of Ohio being of sound mind and memory, do make, publish and declare this my last Will and Testament, in manner following that is to say:

First. I direct that all of my just debts and funeral expenses be paid as soon after my death as may be practicable.

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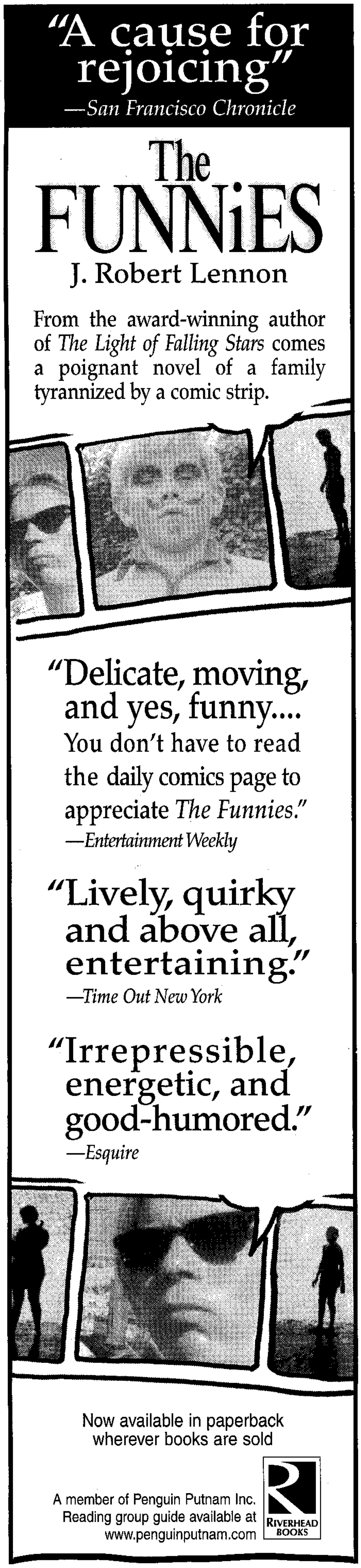

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J. Robert Lennon

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league calls "Hippocratic dedication barely discernible from cretinism," I remain on shaky ground. I have accumulated over a hundred songs in lieu of any suggestion of the green and crinkly, and have not had much luck selling them. That not a single music maven I visited could find a molecule of promise in a hot cabaret number like "Make with the Hormones" or the sublime ballad "Early Alzheimer's" has given me fleeting intimations that Pepkin may not be the next Irving Berlin. Still, in his lilting "Everything's Up to Date at Yonah Schimmel's," which I own and also can't milk a brass farthing from, the line "Knishes and wishes are only for the young" makes me smile with a rueful irony.

Nov. 4th: I have come to the conclusion that Pepkin is a no-talent zombie *momser*. The center began to spring a leak when I discovered that a series of tax shelters structured to maximize my earnings had begun to strike the I.R.S. as curiously similar to those of Al Capone. Disallowing each one with hand-rubbing glee, the Treasury Department elected to suction my holdings to the tune of eight times my net worth. Unable to inhale when this news descended upon me in the form of a subpoena, I explained to Pepkin that I could no longer afford to treat him on the arm, my furniture being moved out by federal marshals even as we spoke. Touched by this request for some measure of genuine coin of the realm, Pepkin terminated his treatment, and on the advice of some shyster he plays eight-ball with sued me for malpractice.

Unable to handle the sudden downsizing and the hardship that accrued when Bergdorf's amputated her charge account, Foxy Breitbart exchanged me even up for an anorexic four-eyed pipsqueak whose computer-chip patent catapulted him, at twenty-five, seven notches above the Sultan of Brunei on a certain list in *Forbes*. Meanwhile, I was left with a trunkful of sheet music with titles like "The Earthworms of Tuscany" and "At the Speleologists' Ball." I tried marketing these tiny white elephants, to no avail, and even checked to see what price they might bring if sold in bulk to a paper-recycling factory. But Pepkin's coup de grâce was yet to come, and come it did, in the person of Wolf Silverglide. Silverglide, a ferret in gabardine, had experienced visions advising him to do a musical reworking of "Lysistrata" called "Not Now, I Have a Headache." Enlivened by clever modern songs, this Attic chestnut, which happened to be in the public domain, would, in Silverglide's view, turn us all into maharajas. The grapevine clued him in to the fact that I owned a carload of unpublished songs that could be garnered for short money. Dusting off my copyrights at last, I optioned an exaltation of hummable ditties to Silverglide in return for some shares in the enterprise and a vintage black-and-white TV set, and his brainchild lurched into production sporting a complete Murray Pepkin score. The best number was a torch song called "Italics Mine," which boasted the magnificent lyric "You're fine, like rare wine, *I love you* (italics mine)."

The show opened to mixed notices. *The Poultryman's Journal* enjoyed it, as did *Cigar Magazine*. The dailies, along with *Time* and *Newsweek*, were more reserved, forming a consensus best summed up by the critic who called it "a black hole of imbecility." Unable to parse the reviews and come up with any kind of quote ad that didn't appear life-threatening, Silverglide folded his extravaganza like a deck chair and blew town photon-fast, leaving me to deal with the avalanche of plagiary suits that poured in.

It seems that Maestro Pepkin's best music proved upon expert testimony to be a scintilla too proximate to certain trifles like "Body and Soul," "Stardust," and even that old military rouser that begins "From the halls of Montezuma." Meanwhile, I'm in court every day, and although it appears I'm staring off into the middle distance, what I'm really thinking is that if I ever run into the undiscovered van Gogh of ASCAP I will take one of my last remaining possessions, a straight razor, and cut *both* his ears off (italics mine). ♦

NEW YORK JOURNAL

A HAZARD OF NO FORTUNE

And you thought finding an apartment today was hard.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

Apartment-hunting is the permanent New York romance, and the broker and his couple the eternal triangle. A man and woman are looking for a place to live, and they call up a broker, and he shows them apartments that are for sale or rent, but the relationship between those three people is much more complicated than the relationship between someone who knows where homes can be found and two people who would like to find one. For one thing, the places are not really his to sell, not really theirs to buy. A tangle of clients and banks, bids and mortgages, co-op boards and co-op skeptics surrounds their relationship. *Hypothèque* is the French word for mortgage, and a hypothetical air attends every step you take: if you could . . . if they would . . . if the bank said . . . if the board allows.

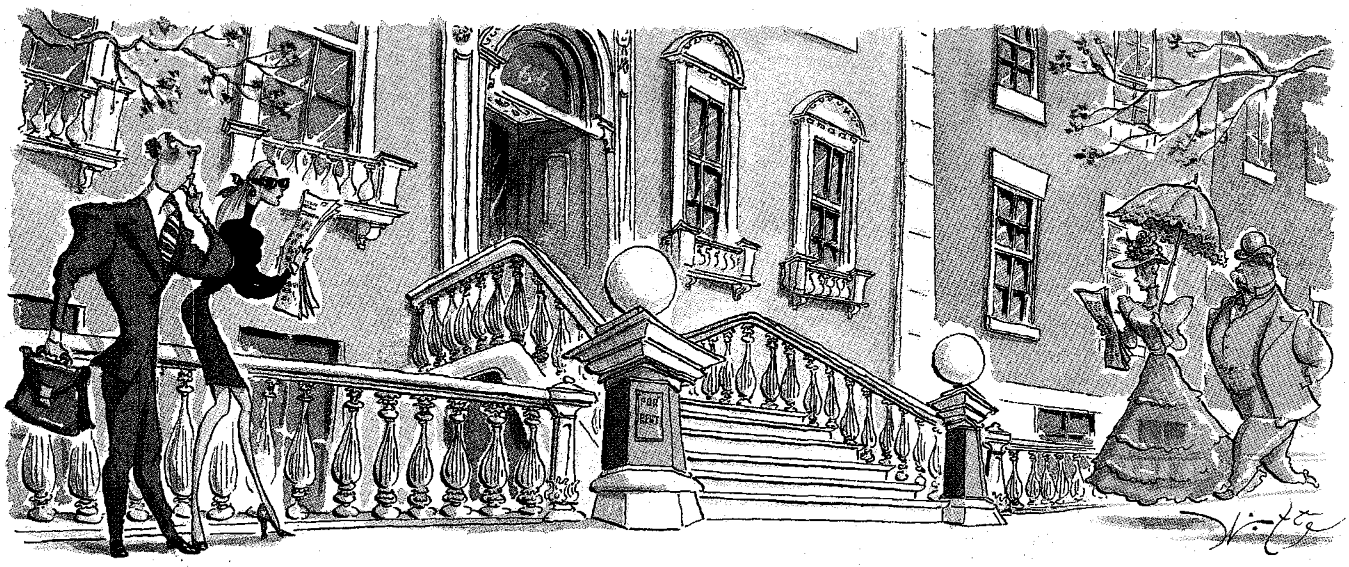
Yet the broker, at the top of the triangle, is a happy man. First, he forms a liaison with the wife, which unites them against all the things that husbands have—doubt, penury, a stunted imagination. Together, the broker winks at the wife, they will scale the heights, find a poetic space, a wking brk frplce, something. But by late morning he has formed a second, darker, homoerotic alliance, with the husband. The two guys share musky common sense, and their eyes exchange glances—she's so *demanding*, pretty much impossible. Now, a couple of guys like us, we could be happy together, take what we can get, fix a place up. The skilled broker keeps the husband and wife in a perpetual state of uncertainty about whose desires will be satisfied.

Over lunch, it becomes plain that the broker has a past, as lovers will. He did something else before—he was a journalist, or a banker, or in advertising. He chose to be a broker because it gave him freedom, and then (he admits) in the nineties it began to give him money, more money than he ever thought possible. He looks sleek in his Italian suit, while his couple feel for the moment like out-of-towners, hicks in cloth coats and rubbers. As coffee arrives, the couple hear his cell phone buzzing, muffled somewhere near his heart. He finds the phone, mutters into it, then speaks up: "Hey, I'm in the middle of lunch." But the husband and wife are temporarily bound together: There is another—one he may love more than us.

The only time the broker loses his poise is when the Rival Broker is waiting for him in the lobby of the building where she has the "exclusive." Ethics and tradition insist that the two brokers show the apartment together, and suddenly the broker, so suave, so sexy, becomes an ex-husband, the two brokers like a couple after a bad divorce, polite only for the sake of the child—the apartment.

The billets-doux of the couple's relationship with the broker are the layouts, the small black-and-white schematic maps of apartments, with key descriptive points set off in bullets: "Triple mint" (meaning not actually falling down); "Room to roam" (a large, dark back room); "Paris rooftops" (a water tower looms in the window of the bedroom). A New York apartment layout is the only known instance of a blueprint that is more humanly appealing than the thing it represents.

One apartment succeeds another. There are the absurd apartments, nestled in towers among towering buildings four feet away, so that every sunless window shows another sunless window, and you could wake every morning to reach out and touch your pallid neighbor with your pallid hand. There are the half-shrunk apartments, with a reasonable living room and two more rooms carved out behind that you have to enter sideways. Then, there are the apartments that are genuinely unique to New York. A hugely expensive "duplex" in the West Seventies, for instance, turns out to be a basement and a sub-basement—the basement where you used to put up your sloppy cousin from Schenectady, the one who never took off his Rangers sweater, and the windowless sub-basement where the



MICHAEL WITTE

janitor was once found molesting children. The apartment's chief attraction is wistfully announced on its blueprint. It is "Near Restaurants."

When you're in a tiny hotel room, apartments begin to crowd your imagination and haunt your nights. They turn into bright-eyed monsters, snaking through your dreams like subway cars. Last Christmas, having decided to try to bring my family home after five years abroad, I found myself walking in fact, and then in spirit, through all these apartments, again and again. As a distraction, I picked up a book I had packed for the journey, William Dean Howells's "A Hazard of New Fortunes." A little more than a hundred years old, it's still the best book about middle-class life—or is it upper-middle? anyway, the lives of salaried professionals—in New York, a great American novel. Instead of fussing about hunting whales or riding rafts or fighting wars, or any of those other small-time subjects, it concerns something really epic: a guy in the magazine business looking for an apartment in Manhattan.

Howells is out of favor now. All literary reputation-making is unjust, but Howells is the victim of perhaps the single greatest injustice in American literary history. The period from 1880 to 1900, Henry Adams once said, was "our Howells-and-James epoch," and the two bearded grandees stood on terms as equal as the Smith Brothers on a cough-drop box. But then Howells got identified, unfairly, with a Bostonian "genteel" tradition, nice and dull. Now James gets Nicole Kidman and Helena Bonham Carter, even for his late, fuzzy-sweater novels, along with biography after biography and collection after collection, and Howells gets one brave, doomed defense every thirty years. Yet Howells, though an immeasurably less original sensibility than James, may be the better novelist, meaning that Howells on almost any subject strikes you as right, while James on almost any subject strikes you as James. Howells's description in "A Hazard" of New York, and of New York apartment-hunting, at the turn of the century comes from so deep a knowledge of what capitalism does to the middle classes, and how it does it to them, that it remains uncannily contemporary. We've spent billions of dollars to prevent our computers' mistaking 2000 for 1900; "A Hazard of New Fortunes" suggests that the error may have been a kind of truth.

In the novel, a diffident and ironic literary man, Basil March, sublets his house in Boston and comes to New York to edit a new magazine, a fortnightly to be called *Every Other Week*. It is to be the first "syndicate" magazine, with the contributors sharing in the profits. (These days, it would be an Internet launch.) Gradually, we learn that the money behind the magazine comes from a backwoods Pennsylvania Dutch natural-gas millionaire named Dryfoos, who, newly arrived in New York, has invested in the magazine as a worldly diversion for his unworldly son, Conrad, who dreams of becoming a priest. (Howells began writing "A Hazard" in the late eighties, when he moved to New York from Cambridge, after editing the *Atlantic Monthly* for ten years.)

Although the action of "A Hazard" eventually takes in the more "panoramic" material of strikes and riots, Howells's genius was to devote the first hundred or so pages of his book to the Marches' apartment-hunting. Isabel March, Basil's wife, who is an old Bostonian, joins him for the search, leaving the children behind in Beantown. They begin with the blithe certainty that it will take a couple of days. "I cut a lot of things out of the Herald as we came on," she tells her husband at their hotel on the first morning, taking "a long strip of paper out of her handbag with minute advertisements pinned transversely upon it, and forming the effect of some glittering nondescript vertebrate." She goes on, "We must not forget just what kind of flat we are going to look for":

> "The sine qua nons are an elevator and steam heat, not above the third floor, to begin with. Then we must each have a room, and you must have your study and I must have my parlor; and the two girls must each have a room. With the kitchen and dining room, how many does that make?"
>
> "Ten."
>
> "I thought eight. Well, no matter. . . . And the rooms must all have outside light. And the rent must not be over eight hundred for the winter. We only get a thousand for our whole house, and we must save something out of that, so as to cover the expenses of moving. Now, do you think you can remember all of that?"

The modern reader waits for the

EROS

I had drawn my chair to the hotel window, to watch the rain.

I was in a kind of dream or trance—
in love, and yet
I wanted nothing.

It seemed unnecessary to touch you, to see you again.
I wanted only this:
the room, the chair, the sound of the rain falling,
hour after hour, in the warmth of the spring night.

I needed nothing more; I was utterly sated.
My heart had become small; it took very little to fill it.
I watched the rain falling in heavy sheets over the darkened city—

You were not concerned; I could let you
live as you needed to live.

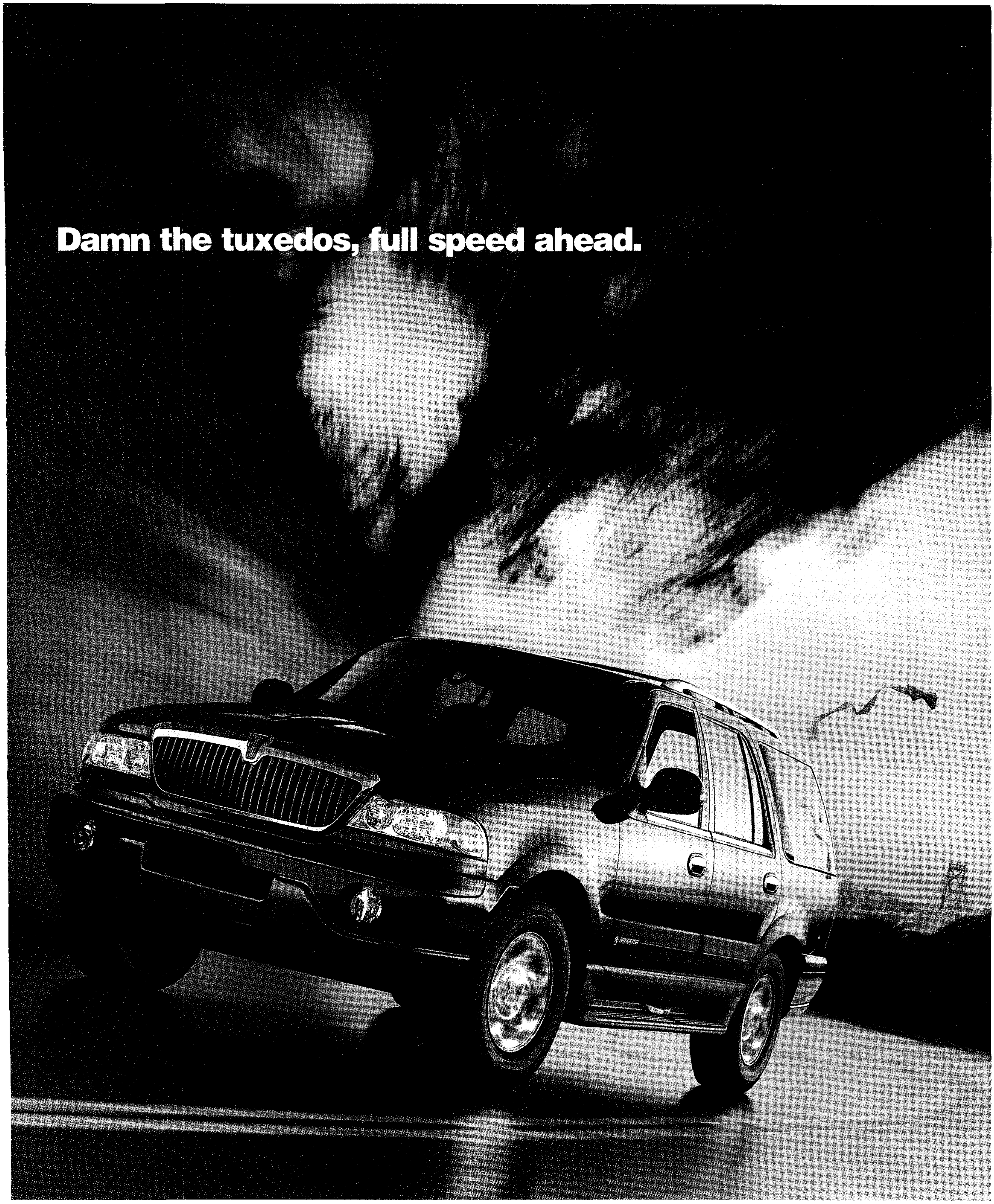
At dawn the rain abated. I did the things
one does in daylight, I acquitted myself,
but I moved like a sleepwalker.

It was enough and it no longer involved you.
A few days in a strange city.
A conversation, the touch of a hand.
And afterward, I took off my wedding ring.

That was what I wanted: to be naked.

—*Louise Glück*

Damn the tuxedos, full speed ahead.



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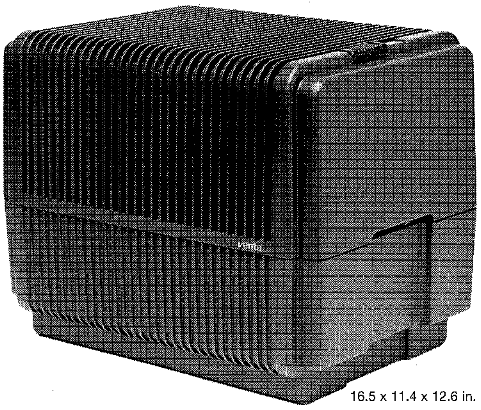

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shock to strike, and it does. They wander from one apartment building to another—all named, with unchanged real-estate developers' pretension, after classical writers. ("There is a vacant flat in the Herodotus for eighteen hundred a year, and one in the Thucydides for fifteen," she sees, lamenting, "What prices!") They visit six apartments in the afternoon, then four more that night. They are all too small, too expensive, too strange—too, well, New York.

> One or two rooms might be at the front, the rest crooked and cornered backward through increasing and then decreasing darkness till they reached a light bedroom or kitchen at the rear. . . . If the flats were advertised as having "all light rooms" [the janitor] explained that any room with a window giving into the open air of a court or shaft was counted a light room.

Basil blames the brokers: "There seems to be something in the human habitation that corrupts the natures of those who deal in it, to buy or sell it, to hire or let it. You go to an agent and tell him what kind of a house you want. He has no such house, and he sends you to look at something altogether different upon the well-ascertained principle that if you can't get what you want, you will take what you can get." And yet the Marches become not repelled by apartment-seeking but addicted to it:

> It went on all day and continued far into the night, until it was too late to go to the theater, too late to do anything but tumble into bed and simultaneously fall on sleep. They groaned over their reiterated disappointments, but they could not deny that the interest was unfailing.

The Marches become mesmerized by the ads, the layouts, the language. "Elegant large single and outside flats" were offered with "all improvements—bath, icebox, etc." Soon the search for an apartment becomes a consuming activity in itself, self-propelling, self-defining—a quest. "Now we are imprisoned in the present," Basil says of New York, "and we have to make the worst of it."

Imprisoned in the present. It seems not to matter when or with how much money you look for an apartment in New York. I've done it officially three times: once as a grad student looking for one room for two, with thirty-five hundred dollars in my pocket to last the year; once as a "yuppie" (we were called that, derisively, before the world was ours), looking for a loft or a one-bedroom; and now as a family guy with a couple of kids. The numbers and the figures change, but the experience remains the same, and feels different from the way it feels anywhere else, with a jag of raised hopes and dashed expectations.

The city is, it's true, shinier than it has ever been. It gleams. It is as if the "broad-band pipe," the philosophers' stone of our era, had already come into existence as a blast hose and washed off the grime. The newsstands that once seemed mainly to stock *Screw* now stock *InStyle* and *Business 2.0*. Even the smells have changed. The essential New York smell twenty years ago was still Italian and Wasp: tomato and olive oil and oregano, acid and pungent, mingled with the indoor, Bloomingdale's smell of sweet, sprayed perfumes. Now, inside the giant boxes that have arrived from America, from the malls (the Gap and Banana Republic and Staples), there is a new, clean pharmacy smell, a disconcerting absence of smells, the American non-smell.

The New Yorkers who arrived in the seventies, the post-"Annie Hall" wave of immigrants, are dismayed by the new shine. They liked the fear and dilapidation that they saw when they came, since it meant that living here required courage. Life in New York was a broken-field run, demanding, even in the "nice" neighborhoods, a continual knowing, sideways-glancing evaluation of everyone else on the street, and what kind of threat each person might represent—white faces in dark shoes searching fearfully for dark faces in white shoes. Today, the rich stroll down the street as though the place belonged to them. (It always did, but now they show it.) A lot of New York existence is like a fantasy mordantly imagined in the nineteen-seventies: picture a city with polite taxi-drivers and children in strollers crowding the avenues, where everyone is addicted to strong, milky coffee.

The horizon seems so secure that places to live these days seem to be conjugated in the future indefinite—some of

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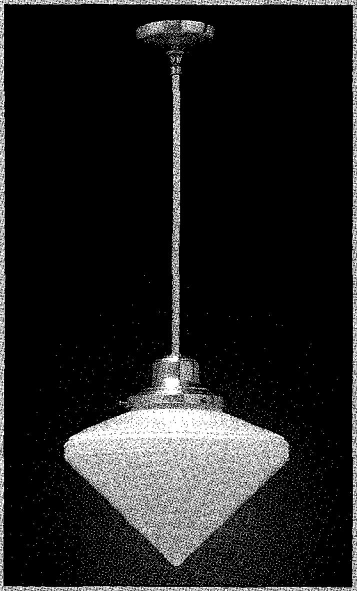

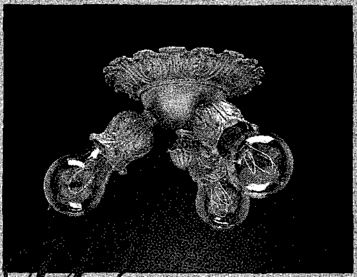

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the apartments one looks at are purely notional, like Priceline.com profits. Not only do the neighborhoods not quite exist yet—whole blocks are now annexed to Tribeca that five years ago were shabby streets fringing City Hall—but the apartments themselves don't exist. Amid the noise and dust of construction work, you enter a "welcome" shed, where you are shown eight-by-eight-inch samples of "finishes": brushed aluminum for the kitchen appliances, maple for the floors, white pine for the kitchen cabinets, one blue tile that is meant to stand for the finished bathroom. The eight-by-eight samples are stapled to a sheet of masonite, like a science project done the night before the science fair.

You sign a paper promising not to sue if you are killed while examining the nonexistent apartments. This is fair; you are simply acknowledging that searching for an apartment in New York is potentially fatal, like scaling Everest. ("They got up to 3-C in plenty of time, but they dawdled in the kitchen, and didn't begin the descent back until it was already growing dark and the squalls were threatening in the service elevator.") You walk into a vast space, into the dust and crashing sounds of an entire world being emptied out, century-old plaster spilling down chutes. The broker leads you up a steep plank to a two-by-four square hole. You duck down and squeeze through—it is like the entrance that leads the Artful Dodger and Oliver into Fagin's den. Then you are in the remains of the wrecked warehouse, with a row of three windows down at one end and perhaps silver tape laid out on the floor: your home. The second broker leads you to the corner window. "I love this line," she sighs with pleasure. "Extrapolate from the finishes," someone orders.

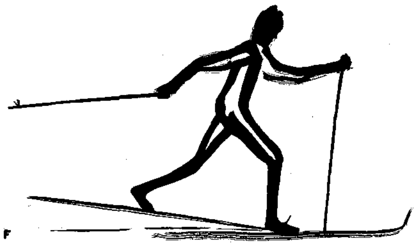
But the Marches have been here, too; you see their Gilded Age forms, like ghosts on North Moore Street, and they are in the same bewildered state:

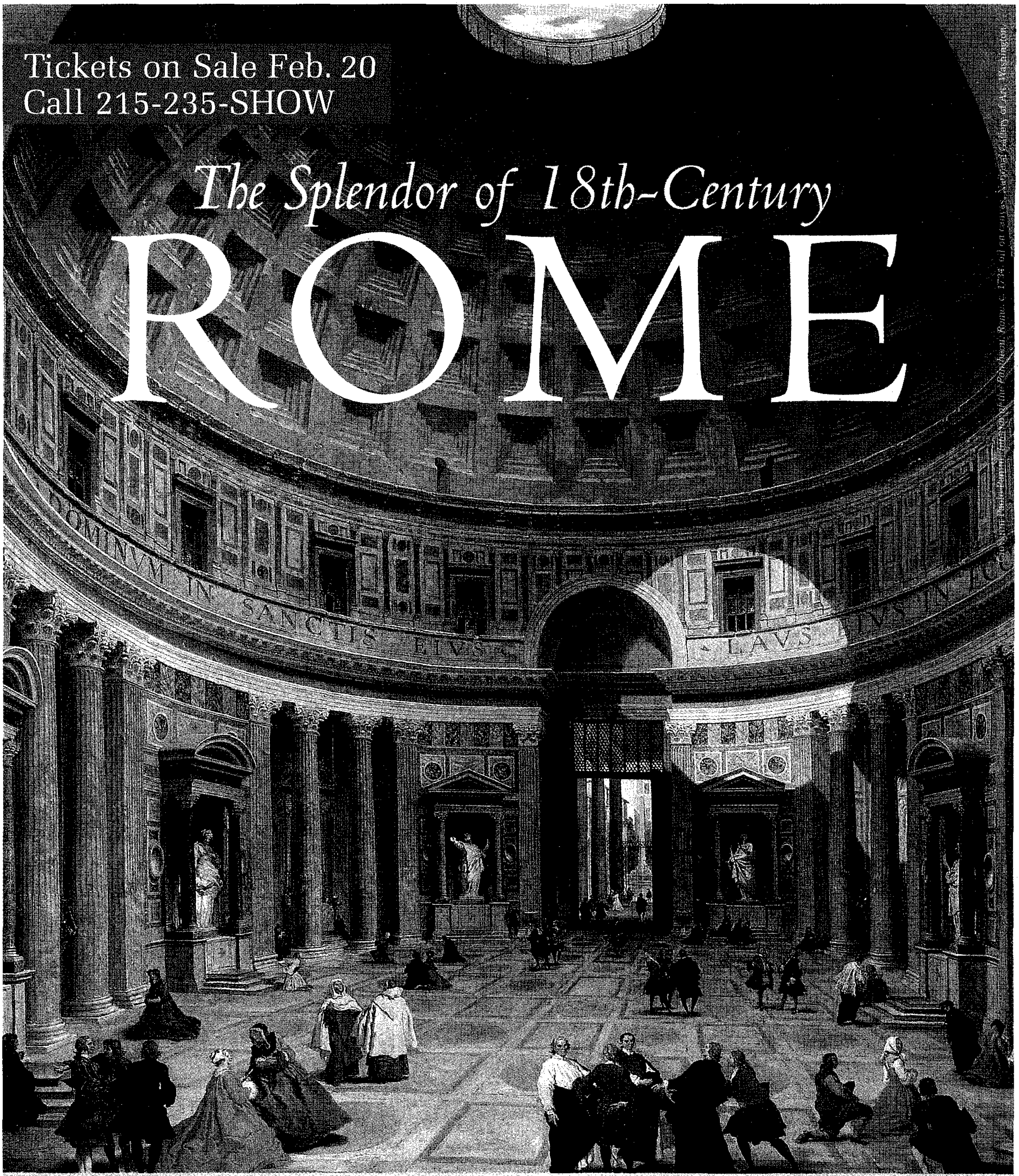
> Mrs. March had out the vertebrate, and was consulting one of its glittering ribs and glancing up from it at a house before which they stood. "Yes, it's the number—but do they call *this* being ready October 1st?"

Isabel boldly goes into the empty place and, "with the female instinct for domiciliation which never failed her," she begins to settle the family in the still unfinished house as the landlord "lent a hopeful fancy to the solution of all her questions." Isabel explains to her skeptical husband, "It's the only way I can realize whether it will do for us. I have to dramatize the whole thing."

Dramatize the whole thing. You can take the Marches with you everywhere in New York. In their day, too, people were haunted by the sixties—the strife at home—which they had agreed to identify in retrospect as a time of true idealism, since mislaid. And then, one also begins to sense, their boom was like ours in its subtle articulation into two phases. In the first phase, having money became a way of entering an older, existing society; in the second, money created its own society. Howells's early novel "The Rise of Silas Lapham" described the plight of the typical millionaire-adventurer trying and failing to make his way in Boston society of the eighteen-seventies, "hemmed in and left out at every turn by ramifications that forbid him all hope of safe personality in his comments." By the time of "A Hazard," money is the only ramification left.

Although our boom sometimes seems one continuous curve of money and manners that began around 1984, it, too, has had two phases. In the eighties, the familiar mechanisms that give new money the appearance of old—turning money into charity or culture—still operated, at times feverishly. Newly rich men in the eighties were driven by the same amalgam of guilt and gilt that drove the robber barons of the Gilded Age to have their portraits made by Sargent and buy Renaissance or even Impressionist pictures. To buy a risky picture in the nineteen-eighties—a Fischl, a Salle, a Koons—was to give commercial risk the patina of aesthetic risk. The circles of social life turned more or less the same elaborate machinery that they had turned a century earlier: the cogs in the greed wheel turn the money wheel,

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which turns the culture wheel, which turns the social wheel—until at last the aspirant gains a seat at the central wheel table, where the hostess is called "Mrs." (Mrs. Wrightsman, Mrs. Astor), and he has at last arrived.

By the nineties, new rules had begun to fall into place, just as they did in Howells's nineties. Everyone in "A Hazard," rich or poor, is an immigrant: there are no native New Yorkers, no indigenous established society. There are just people with new money, or people dependent on it, having dinners for each other. The unwashed Dryfooses, Isabel discovers, to her shock, do not know that they are out of society, because they do not know there is a society to be in. (The Dryfoos daughters don't even take piano lessons; they play the banjo.) Dryfoos buys the magazine to occupy his son, not to achieve a social position; when he wants to have a dinner party to celebrate the new magazine, it turns into a glorified office party, the same old faces. In today's New York, too, the parties that people talk about seem to be glorified office parties, propelled not by hostesses but by verbs and gerunds: launches and start-ups and initial public offerings.

In a society in which money has gained its sovereign virtue, art—and the ascension it symbolizes—no longer matters in quite the same way. When George Bellows's 1910 painting "The Polo Crowd" was bought by an unnamed millionaire a few months ago, it violated essential Veblenian status-creating principles. The picture was being sold by the Museum of Modern Art because "it did not fit into its collection"; i.e., wasn't good enough. It went for three times the estimate. The guy who paid twenty-seven and a half million dollars for the painting didn't buy it because he wished to acquire status from it; its status had been officially denied by the status-granting institution. He bought it because he liked it. Society totters.

Isabel has the apartment dream, too! "It was something about the children at first," she tells Basil, and then it was "of a hideous thing with two square eyes and a series of sections growing darker and then lighter, till the tail of the monstrous articulate was quite luminous again." March says, laughing, "Why, my

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dear, it was nothing but a harmless New York flat—seven rooms and a bath.”

Haunted by that dream, Isabel returns to Boston, and Basil, in a fit of resignation, rents a horrible furnished apartment that she has seen and rejected. “He was aware more than ever of its absurdities, he knew that his wife would never cease to hate it,” but he also “felt a comfort in committing himself and exchanging the burden of indecision for the burden of responsibility.”

The magazine begins to prosper, and March tries to do good with Dryfoos’s money by going downtown to offer work to a German-American socialist translator named Lindau, who taught him Heine back in the Midwest, when he was a boy. He finds Lindau living in Chinatown, on Mott Street. “But what *are* you living here for, Lindau?” he asks. Lindau explains that he has come here to see poverty. “How much money can a man honestly earn without wronging or oppressing some other man?” Lindau asks, and then answers his question: “It is the landlords and the merchant princes, the railroad kings and the coal barons . . . it is these that *make* the millions, but no man *earns* them. What artist, what physician, what scientist, what poet, was ever a millionaire?”

“That’s Tom and Nicole’s, that’s Barbra’s, that’s Bruce’s, that’s the one Bruce gave to Demi after the divorce, that’s Madonna’s,” the broker goes, pointing upward at all the great turrets, the high crowning spires, of the classic apartment buildings of Central Park West. Apparently, they all belong, like feudal keeps, to the stars who have immigrated to New York, as Howells did, as the Marches did. Perhaps they wave at each other, tower to tower, in the morning, as neighbors should.

Isabel and Basil, you realize, were the first victims of a persistent American illusion: even the upper-middle classes in a plutocratic society, Howells believed, are always in precarious shape, and usually don’t know it. In New York, they do. Outside New York, the bourgeoisie does tend to live in ways not entirely unlike the rich. The Marches’ little house in Boston, though hardly grand, is a house, with a house’s accoutrements and pleasures, as would be the case in Cambridge (or Philadelphia) today. New York tends

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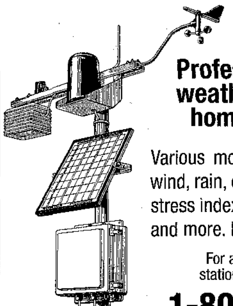

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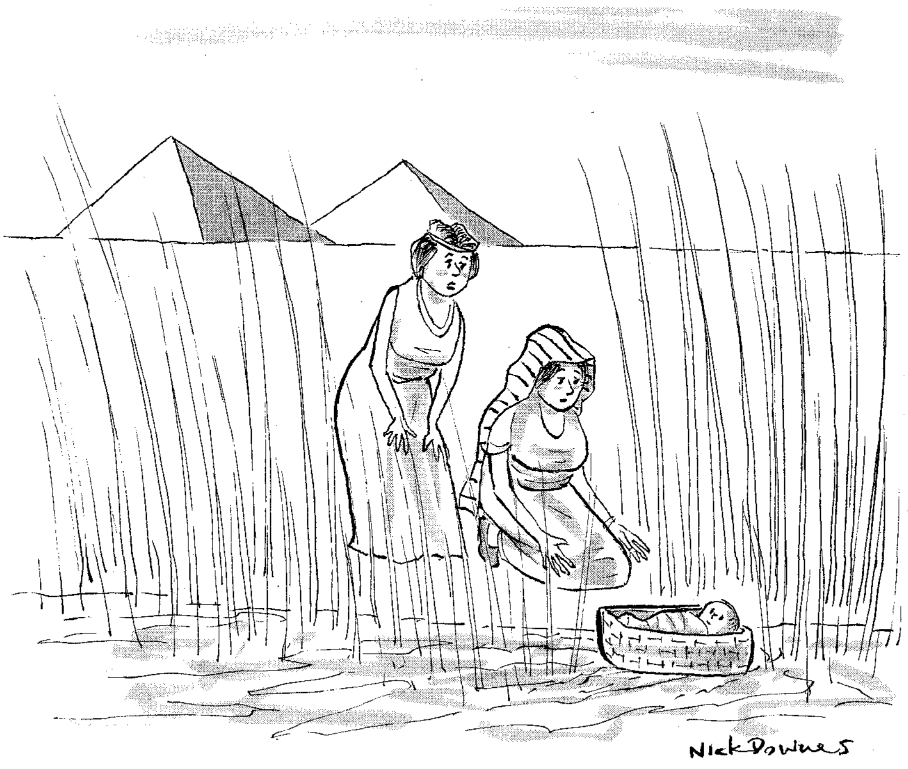
to invite the middle classes to live alongside the rich, and then makes visible the true space between them, draws a line in outside light. Unlike London and Paris, the two other great capitals of bourgeois civilization, Manhattan has never really been symbolized by middle-class housing. The sweep of semidetached houses in Knightsbridge or Kensington, the long boulevards filled with bourgeoisie in the Sixteenth and Eighth Arrondissements of Paris sum up the image of those places. New York, on the other hand, is famous for William Randolph Hearst's penthouse and Sister Eileen's basement apartment, or, more recently, for the Trump Tower aerie and the Tribeca loft. A nuclear family living in a little house in Manhattan is a *sight.* The old enclaves of the true bourgeoisie, Riverside Drive and York Avenue, were on the margins of the island, and their high period was a short one. (My great-aunt, like everybody else's, moved into a fifteen-room apartment on Riverside Drive in the forties, and it had been broken up by the sixties, barely a generation's worth of extra closets. Each of its divided parts now costs more money than my great-uncle made in a lifetime.)

At one moment in "A Hazard," Isabel and Basil pretend to be millionaires simply in order to see what lies beyond their means. "They looked at three-thousand-and four-thousand-dollar apartments and rejected them for one reason or another which had nothing to do with the rent; the higher the rent, the more critical they were." Inspired by them, we decided to do it, too.

What you find, though, when you search—well, not the spires (what, are you kidding?) but the spaces that hold up the spires—is not luxury, twisting staircases and panoramic windows, but the old American representations of normalcy and domestic comfort. What you find isn't Fred Astaire's apartment in "Daddy Long Legs" but Meg Ryan's apartment in a Nora Ephron movie, the apartment where Hannah lived in the Woody Allen film, the flat that Mr. Blandings is desperate to escape in order to build his dream house. There are kitchens that look like kitchens, living rooms like living rooms, bedrooms like bedrooms. A millionaire's life in New York is still what normal life looks like on



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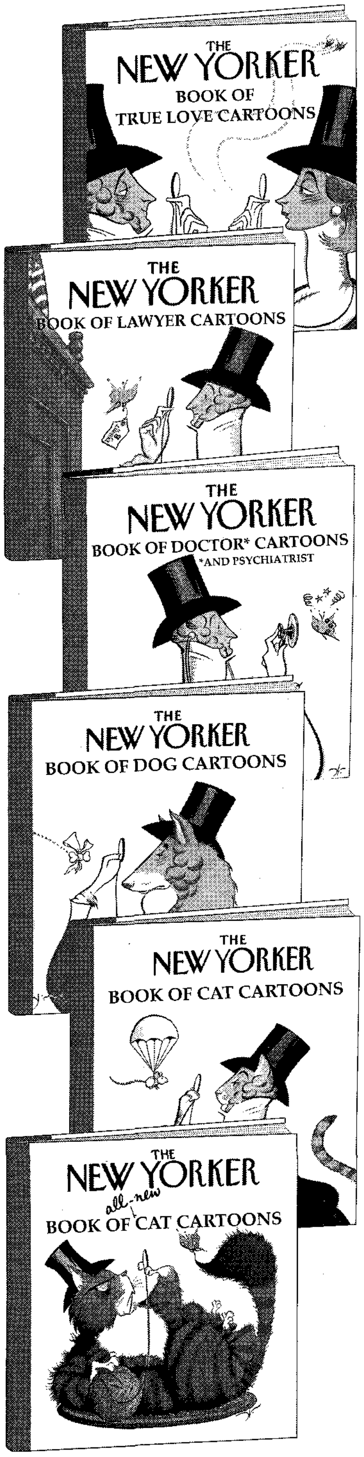
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a cereal box. And this is exactly what draws the people in the spires to live in the spires: the movie star who moves here announces that he likes New York because he can live like a normal person, because his kids can have normal lives, and, in a weird way, he means it.

For Howells, the inevitable result of plutocracy, exemplified by the apartment madness and Lindau's despair, is popular revolt and its repression. A trainmen's strike threatens to paralyze the city, and Basil, in a fit of reportorial responsibility, goes to "cover" the strike and sees Lindau struck down by a policeman—and then sees Dryfoos's saintly young son lose his life in an attempt to rescue the old socialist.

Howells himself became a Tolstoyan (i.e., mushy) socialist, and he wrote for Basil March a long concluding speech in which March realizes that the hazard of new fortunes is his, too. "What I object to is this economic chance world in which we live and which we men seem to have created," he tells Isabel. A working man should be guaranteed his livelihood and his repose, and it is insupportable that he is not:

> At my time of life—at every time of life—a man ought to feel that if he will keep on doing his duty he shall not suffer in himself or in those who are dear to him, except through natural causes. But no man can feel this as things are now, and so we go on. Pushing and pulling, climbing and crawling, thrusting aside and trampling underfoot, lying, cheating, stealing; and when we get to the end, covered with blood and dirt and sin and shame, and look back over the way we've come to a palace of our own, or the poorhouse, which is about the only possession we can claim in common with our brother men, I don't think the retrospect can be pleasing....People are greedy and foolish and wish to have and to shine, because having and shining are held up to them by civilization as the chief good of life....We can't help it. If one were less greedy or less foolish, someone else would have and would shine at his expense.

This economic chance world in which we live. A hundred years ago, the one thing that Howells—and Henry Adams and so many others—knew for sure was that a society with a tiny plutocratic class, a precarious middle class, and a large and immigration-fed proletariat simply could not go on. Now, at the turn of another century, we find it is the only thing that has gone on, in nearly perfect duplicate. August Belmont celebrated

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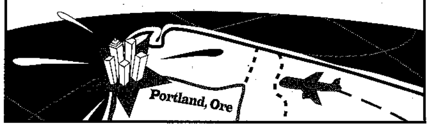

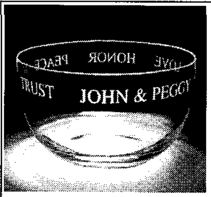

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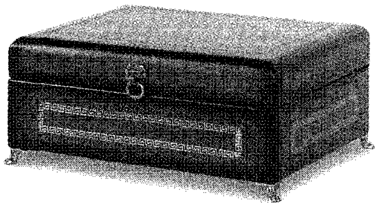

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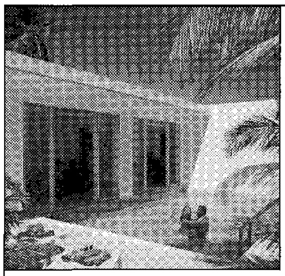

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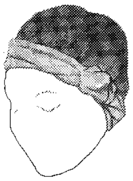

the last fin de siècle in a suit of golden armor; everyone who celebrated this fin de siècle in costume with the Soroses came away, we're told, with a bronze medallion, embossed with the hosts' profiles. Three-star chefs are flown in from Paris for a night's diversion; ghost mining towns in Colorado are revived and fully peopled for two weeks each summer as "camps" where the rich can entertain their courtiers. Someone has just bought the International Center of Photography, a grand old mansion on Fifth Avenue, in order to turn it back into a private house, reversing the century-old process by which the mansions of the fin-de-siècle rich became institutions. The plutocracy has never been so plutocratic.

What makes it possible for the economic chance world to go on so peaceably now, with hardly a hint of the opposition that Howells took for granted? It is that a sense of Hazard has been replaced by Hope. It seemed to Howells that hazard and fortune were as right together as pride and lions, that risk and moneymaking were one. What's striking about this new Gilded Age isn't just that people are selling hope but that everyone is buying it. All the folk memories of busts and depressions past seem to have vanished; the rhetoric of hope has overcome even the romance of risk, the sinister glamour of greed.

The new tycoons are not in industry, like Howells's, or in asset stripping, like Tom Wolfe's. They don't look like old man Dryfoos, grasping and raw. They look, more often, like his son, Conad, all quivering sensitivity and high-minded devotion to the future. The places of the new fortunes are not sweatshops or mines—not here, anyway—but ateliers reclaimed from the light-industrial Old New York the Marches knew. Six computers, a server, a wall of glass brick, a stamped-tin ceiling, a bright post-ironic attitude—these are the materials of a dot-com company, of the new fortunes. It is hope (and its Siamese twin, debt) that empties out the buildings on North Moore Street and calls on you to extrapolate from the samples, hope that keeps you looking, that gets you to dramatize the whole thing. If it is a bubble—and common sense tells you that it must be—it has a bubble's bright, single highlight, and it encloses Manhattan from Ninety-sixth Street to the harbor. Hope is what gives this age its odd and original gleam, a strange ingenuous glow different from that of the Marches' age, a century ago, when even the people who had the gold knew the age was merely gilded. "Having and shining, having and shining": we still believe it. But now we shine first, and assume that, if the glow is bright enough, we will all have later.

Howells, like Basil, was radicalized by his experience in New York in the eighteen-nineties. "I abhor it," he wrote to Henry James of American capitalism, "and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality." But, like Isabel, he also learned that New York is a city of accommodations. This double movement gives his masterpiece its pathos and its enduring moral. Later, he wrote of himself and his wife, "We are theoretical socialists, and practical aristocrats. But it is a comfort to be right theoretically, and to be ashamed of one's self practically." "Practical aristocrats": a lovely calling, nice work if you can get it.

It is at least a relief to discover that at the end of "A Hazard of New Fortunes" the Marches find a place to live for good. If the explicit moral of the novel is radical, its dramatic point is Isabel's acceptance of New York domestic arrangements, and her education in the irony necessary to accept them. Dryfoos, after the death of his son, goes off to Paris, selling *Every Other Week* to Basil and his publisher for a song. There is a big empty space on the second floor of the building, right above the editorial offices, and Basil and Isabel decide to live there with the kids. It is a sign of Isabel's transformation that this idea—in Boston, she thinks, fit only for Irish laundresses—is now acceptable to her. She has become as diffident and ironic as her husband, as someone seeing life pass by from the El. She has become a New Yorker, and she will live above the store. "In New York," she reflects at last, "you may do anything." ♦

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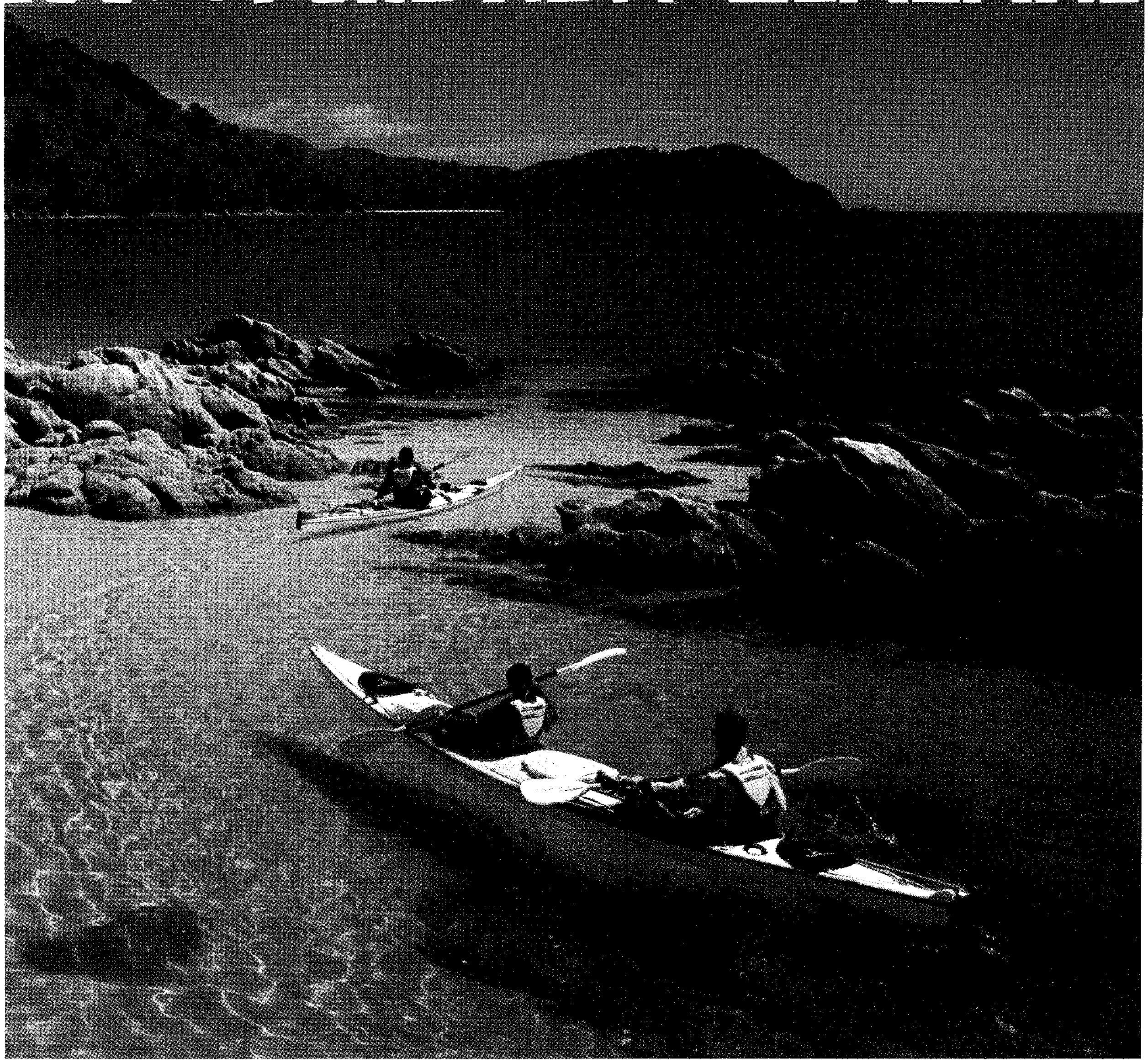

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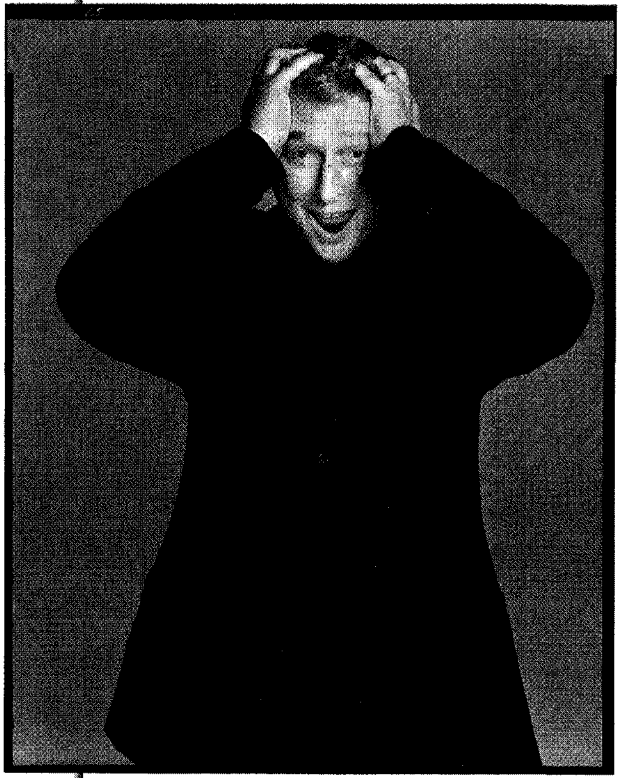
PROFILES

MAKING IT REAL

How Mike Nichols re-created comedy and himself.

BY JOHN LAHR



Once, in the early seventies, Mike Nichols was sitting in a commercial jet as it took off from J.F.K. Moments after it was airborne, the plane went into what Nichols recalls as "an unnervingly steep bank. Everybody looked at each other. Nobody knew what it meant." The pilot came on the intercom. "We are experiencing—" he began in his best "Right Stuff" drawl. Then, suddenly, he said, "Just a minute!" The mike went dead. In the long silence that followed, the people on the airplane started to panic. A woman a few rows in front of Nichols turned around and looked squarely at him. "What do we do now, Mr. Success?" she said.

Nichols, who has a sharp American wit but courtly European manners, bit his tongue. "All those 'Mr. Success' years would have been hard to explain to anybody if I tried," Nichols, now sixty-eight, says. "What I really wanted to say to that envious woman was 'Don't worry. There's still nothing happening inside me. I'm not experiencing success or anything much.' "

But feelings aren't facts. From the moment Nichols made his name, in the late fifties, as the lanky deadpan half of the comedy team Nichols and May, he took up residence in success. As early as 1961, a letter addressed to "Famous Actor, Mike Nichols, U.S.A." reached him. And, by the seventies, Nichols represented the high-water mark in not just one but three areas of American entertainment. As a comedian, he improvised routines with Elaine May which are among the treasures of American humor; as a stage director, beginning in the early sixties, he had a string of commercial hits that made him the most successful Broadway director since George Abbott; as a film director, he made the bold, intelligent "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" (1966) and "The Graduate" (1967). The latter, for which he won an Academy Award and which both summed up and influenced his generation, got him off the Hollywood blocks perhaps faster than any director since Orson Welles.

Nichols has made seventeen films in the last three decades. Success, however, as Winston Churchill said, is never final. On May 3, 1999—just one day short of sixty years since Nichols, then Michael

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD AVEDON

Mike Nichols, opposite, with Elaine May, in 1960, and, above, last November.

"Those D's are misleading."

• •

Igor Peschkowsky, the son of a White Russian émigré and a German beauty, arrived in New York by boat from Germany—he found himself at one of those occasions he likes to call a "ratfuck," at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall, where more than three thousand citizens had gathered to celebrate his lifetime achievement in film. The first part of the evening was a cinematic homage. Just before it began, Nichols and his wife, Diane Sawyer—the most observed of all observers—took their seats in the front row of a box just beside the stage and surveyed the illustrious guests below, among them Richard Avedon, Steve Martin, Itzhak Perlman, Stephen Sondheim, Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg, and Barbara Walters. Nichols assumed the runic crooked smile Elizabeth Taylor describes as "that smile that tilts up at one end, that you can read so much into—a shared joke, a certain skepticism." Then, one by one, various grandees of American popular culture—Meryl Streep, Paul Simon, Elaine May, Harrison Ford, Buck Henry, Nora Ephron, Candice Bergen, Art Garfunkel, Matthew Broderick, Nathan Lane—filed into the box, too, and flanked the evening's sovereigns. They were part of Nichols's story; later in the ceremony, in their encomiums from the stage, they would individually swear allegiance to him like courtiers to a king—which, in a way, he is.

"He knows that all the Versailles stuff is bullshit," says the screenwriter Buck Henry, a close friend who has scripted three of Nichols's films, including "The Graduate." "He knows when his ass is being kissed, and he knows when it isn't, although it is most of the time. He casts a baleful eye on all of it, but in his heart he wants it and needs it." In its de-luxe panoply, the Lincoln Center extravaganza fulfilled one of Nichols's lifelong fantasies. "He's on an island that belongs to him, manned on the turrets by men with machine guns," another close friend, Richard Avedon, explains. "People can only get in with a passport, and then only his friends." The need for a seamless armor is the legacy of Nichols's friendless, despairing refugee childhood. When he arrived from Berlin, at the age of seven, he was totally bald; he'd been permanently denuded of all body hair at the age of four, a reaction to a defective whooping-cough vaccine. He knew just two English sentences—"I do not speak English" and "Please do not kiss me." He'd lost his homeland, his language, his class pedigree, and, by the age of twelve, he would also lose his father. "I was a zero," Nichols says now. He adds, "In every way that mattered, I was powerless." Nichols sought something to counteract his paralyzing sense of inadequacy and to disarm a world that he saw, and still sees, as predatory and cruel. "The most useful thing is if your enemy doesn't know he's your enemy," Nichols told me, setting out the rule of dissimulation by which, over the years, he has kept the world in his thrall. "Never let people see what you want, because they will not let you have it. Never let anybody see what you feel, because it gives them too much power. You're probably better off not showing weakness whenever you can avoid it, because they'll go for you." With its aspects of detachment, generosity, and control, the imperial posture has served him well.

On the night of Nichols's gala, Elaine May couldn't resist a wink at his jerry-built crown. "So he's witty, he's brilliant, he's articulate, he's on time, he's prepared, and he writes," she said. "But is he perfect? He knows that you can't really be liked or loved if you're perfect. You have to have just enough flaws. And he does. Just the right perfect flaws to be absolutely endearing. And my three minutes are up, but if I had another four seconds I'd tell you every one of those flaws."

Nichols is a purveyor of aplomb, a

rare commodity these days. He lives like a pasha and long ago took up the kingly pastime of breeding Arabian horses. (In 1972, he had the national-champion stallion and mare, Elkin and Elkana.) Over the years, Nichols, who calls himself "a Dionysian who gets tired easily," has also been romantically linked to a variety of goddesses—goddesses of literature (Robert Graves's Black Goddess, Margot Callas, who was Nichols's second wife), goddesses of glamour (Suzy Parker), activism (Gloria Steinem), society (Jackie Onassis), and the media (Sawyer, who became the fourth Mrs. Nichols, in 1988). Well before Nichols grew into his grandiosity, his hauteur had him typecast in college plays as the Dauphin and the emperor. With his long Russian nose, he emits a kind of mandarin snottiness—what Woody Allen calls "his superb contumely," adding, "It's supercilious in the way we all wish we had the genius for. He's a nice version of George Sanders in 'All About Eve.' " At a dinner party in the sixties, Nichols corrected Norman Mailer, who had declared that his favorite line of poetry was Dylan Thomas's "Do not go quietly into that good night." "Actually, it's 'gentle,' " Nichols said. " 'Quietly' wouldn't scan, would it?" Mailer rounded on Nichols, calling him a "royal baby," a put-down that Nichols thought was "pretty good." (In jollier circumstances, Sawyer has been known to refer to her husband as "His Royal Cuteness.")

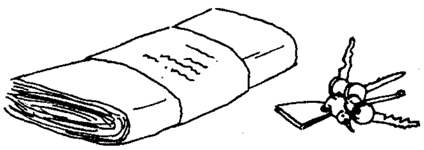
At the finale of the gala, Nichols had planned to go onstage and say to the assembled, "Well, that's all very well and good, but what about my humanity? What about my *fucking* humanity?" But Art Garfunkel scuppered the joke by speaking earnestly to that very point. So when Nichols stepped before his audience—a tall man with big, gnarly hands and an indulged belly that precedes him by some inches—he resorted to another gripe. "Where the hell is Dustin Hoffman?" Nichols said. "He was nothing when I found him." His straight face caught the audience off guard and made the joke ambiguous. "It's like the monster not showing up at the tribute for Dr. Frankenstein," he continued. "Actually, I suspect that his not showing up is related to my not going to his A.F.I. tribute, although that was all the way across the country. . . . Well, it's all blood under the bridge now."

But blood has a way of sticking to things; even the solvent of Nichols's wit can't wipe out certain dark spots. In his movie career, things have not all gone Nichols's way. There was a string of flops in the mid-seventies: "Catch-22" (1970), "The Day of the Dolphin" (1973), "The Fortune" (1975), and "Bogart Slept Here," which Nichols closed down in production; there followed a seven-year hiatus before his next film, the excellent "Silkwood" (1983). Some of his later movies—"Heartburn" (1986), "Regarding Henry" (1991), "Wolf" (1994)—were more or less rumbled by the critics. In 1995, after Nichols had shown the final cut of "The Birdcage" (which went on to gross more than a hundred and eighty million dollars worldwide) to his editing team on Martha's Vineyard, he sat down with them for a celebratory meal. "I was very emotional and very angry. I couldn't speak all through lunch," Nichols told a friend. "The film was so good, so strong. I realized I'd had no inkling of my anger at the people who had written me off. My reaction, instantaneously, was 'Fuck you, bastards. You thought I couldn't do this anymore. Well, look at this.' "

So, here at his retrospective, Nichols both masked and displayed his vindictive triumph. As a parting shot, he announced that he was leaving the next day for Los Angeles, to go into preproduction on his new film—a comedy called "What Planet Are You From?" And he left the audience with a slightly altered version of W. H. Auden's acid envoi—a ruler's deadpan rebuke to those young upstarts "who think they could do it better" and who might dismiss the proceedings as merely "geezer aggrandizement":

Death takes the innocent young,
As poets have frequently sung,
The rolling-in-money,
The screamingly funny,
And even the very well-hung.

In mid-July, I caught up with Nichols in his current kingdom, Sound Stage 15, at Culver Studios, in Culver City, where a broken ankle and crutches—the result of a spill on the set—in no way impeded his show of good spirits. "Life is difficult and fucked up and complicated," Nichols says. "The cutting room isn't." At the studio, his power is absolute. "I really need to control it. Every aspect of it, every nuance of the reading. How long every second of every shot is," he says. "Partly because that's the job, and partly because I just have to. I'm happy when I'm controlling it and uncomfortable when I'm not and crazed when it's out of control."

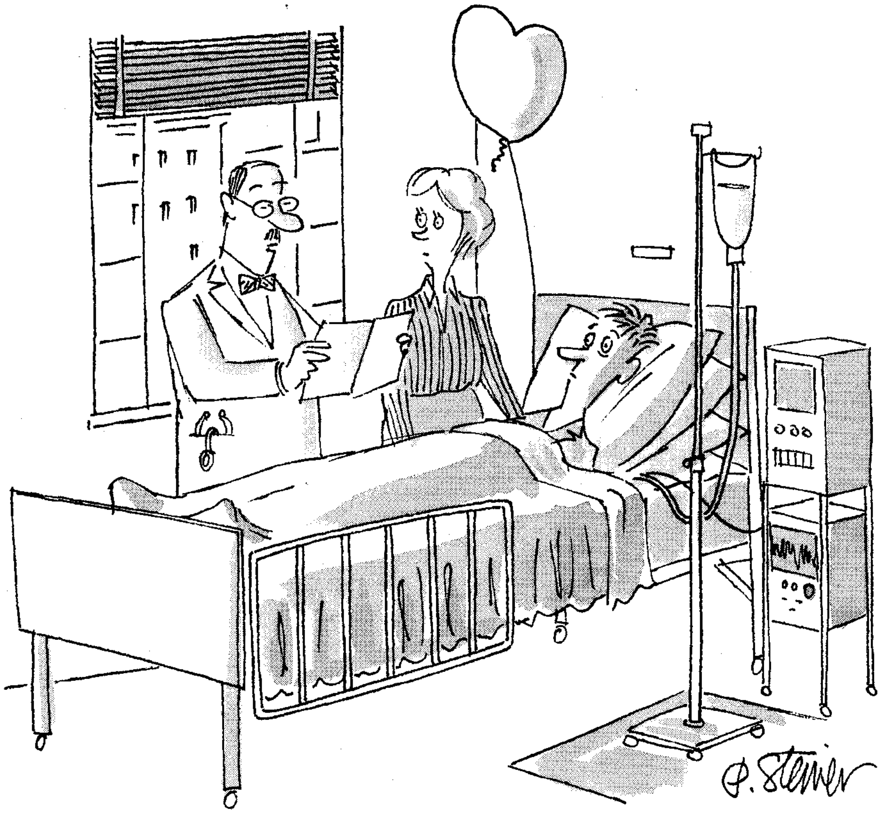


On the set, Nichols's wit serves him well both as a social lubricant and as an equalizer. In conversation, he lays out his colorful word hoard like a vender at a bazaar—a delightful abundance of erudition, playfulness, and surprise, which helps take the odor off his Eeyore-like nature. His voice, which is nasal and comes from the back of his throat, can wring all sorts of sardonic music from the sounds of words. "A retreat? How *moving*. It's not a sweat lodge, is it?" he says, taking a call on his portable phone as the crew prepares for a scene with Garry Shandling and Ben Kingsley. "Come and see me. We can have a *tiny* retreat in my trailer."

While the shot is being set up, Nichols hobbles away toward his trailer, which is parked opposite the sound stage; the makeup man standing at the shadowy threshold of the building cautions Nichols about the ledge he's standing on. "Thank you, Roy," Nichols says. "Where were you when I fell in that hole?" Among the myriad problems facing Nichols on this particular cerulean day, as he clambers up the steps to his trailer, is what to get the cast as an end-of-production present. "My assistant came up with a silver—what do you call it—vibrator," he says. "I'm not sure. Maybe if it has *Ars Gratia Artis* on it." Inside, the trailer is dominated by photos of his handsome children—Daisy, thirty-five, who dubs movies into French; Max, twenty-five, who is a record-company A. & R. man; and Jenny, twenty-three, a student at Brown—and by food (See's Candies, jelly beans, nuts, chocolate-chip cookies). Nichols, who has never met a calorie he didn't like, is, as Candice Bergen says, "a poster child for unhealthy living." Because he's currently immobilized and can't climb up onto the space-station set, a gizmo called a "god box" has been installed in his trailer, just opposite the sofa. A microphone allows Nichols to talk directly to his players as he watches them. “It’s annoying,” he says. “It’s like wearing a condom. You’re there and you’re not there.”

“What Planet Are You From?” is about an alien, played by Shandling, who, as part of a plan to dominate the universe, is sent to earth to impregnate as many women as possible and take over the planet from within. Nichols inspects a replay of the just completed scene in which Ben Kingsley, the leader of Shandling’s planet, taps him for the procreative mission. “The success of our planet’s domination of the universe rests in your hands,” Kingsley says, in his gravest British Received Pronunciation. “Now, if you’ll come this way we’ll arrange your transfer and attach your penis.” A big, chesty laugh rumbles through Nichols’s body. “Kingsley was put on earth to say that line,” he says, and laughs some more. Nichols has as many kinds of laughs as he does ironic inflections, but his high-pitched Big Laugh is like no other. His eyes widen, his body stiffens, his pale skin reddens as hilarity crashes over him. In that moment of wipeout, all of Nichols’s power, self-consciousness, and royal command vanish into childish delight. This wheezy, teary collapse has been captured on record (“Nichols and May at Work”); and anyone who has been in its force field knows the strength of its infectiousness. “It’s incredible when you get it,” Neil Simon told me. “It inspires you to show him more material to get it again.”

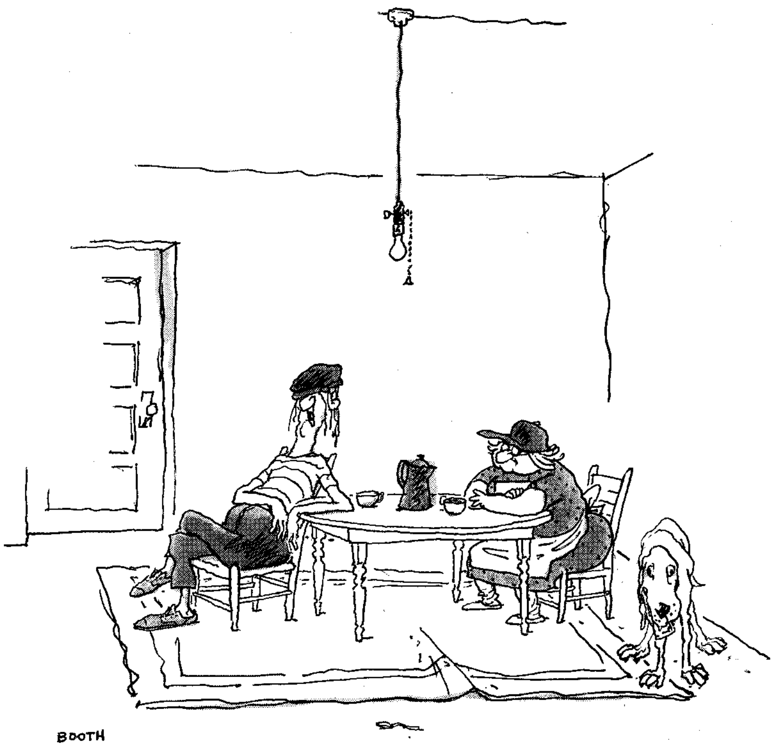
In the next shot, which is the movie’s finale, Shandling goes into a righteous harangue—“Why are we taking over earth? Is that what it’s about? More, more, more?”—and Nichols stops him in mid-flow. “It’s a moment from an operetta,” he says. “We don’t want that gesture. It’s too Jewish.” Speech, like the portrayal of a character, is in the details; Nichols watches over it with vigilance. “I constantly have to edit the things I want to say,” he adds. “Shambling and I get into this kidding thing, but then it gets a little bit out of hand.” “He’s called ‘Shambling,’ is he?” I ask. Nichols fixes me with a lidded glance. “Well, now and then,” he says. Nichols continues, “He’s playing the game of student with the master, which is partly meant to disarm me. He’s not without self-knowledge. He knows how to use me to make certain things happen to him in scenes. The game is useful to us both.”



“We can give you enough medication to alleviate the pain but not enough to make it fun.”

But the previous week, for what Nichols said was the first time in his directing career, he had screamed at his star, who is also the film’s co-author. Nichols knows that he can be withering. There was a moment during the filming of “The Day of the Dolphin” when Nichols saw himself becoming a tyrannical bastard. “I remember that I told the D.P.”—director of photography—“toward the end that I was not proud of the way I had treated the guys and I wanted to apologize,” he says. “And he—a very mild man—said, ‘It’s too late for that.’ It took my breath away. It made me realize that I had to put the brakes on completely. Because nobody can fight back, the director has an absolute obligation to treat people decently.” By his own admission, he had gone “totally nuts” at Shandling, in an outburst that sent people scurrying off the set. He explains, “Garry came in and didn’t know the scene, although he’d written it. Annette Bening, of course, knew it perfectly. After it was over, I said something to her about her character.” Bening plays a ditzy recovering alcoholic, with no knack for picking Mr. Right. “Garry said, ‘I think she should be kooky.’ I said, ‘You do? Her clothes are kooky, the set is kooky, her lines are kooky—you want her to *act* kooky, too?’ I said, ‘Why don’t you come in prepared and do your own work?’ ”

“It was mean,” Bening told me. “He was attacking Garry inappropriately. It was really out of line.” Shandling apologized for being unprepared, and Bening then met with Nichols in his trailer to defend Shandling’s right to have a creative conversation, a point that Nichols conceded when he, in turn, apologized to Shandling. In Nichols’s remorse, Bening saw a “fierce superego.” “He’s not as generous to himself as he deserves to be,” she says. “He’s got a voice in him that’s very harsh, and unnecessarily so.” In his surprising anger—he now says he was “much angrier than seemed warranted”—Nichols saw “the dim racial memory of rage,” that little boy in himself who is still angry and whom he constantly struggles to keep down. “He’s the one,” Nichols says. "He's somewhere saying, 'Don't fuck with me.' And I can't stop him."



"If I won forty-seven million dollars in the lottery, I wouldn't change a thing. Not at first."

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"All the shit was in the beginning," Nichols says of his life. Hitler—or his voice, broadcast from speakers on dockside lampposts—literally saw Nichols and his three-year-old brother, Robert, off to America in 1939. Nichols remembers not being allowed to board the Bremen, which was leaving from Hamburg, until the traffic-stopping speech was finished. The brothers, each with ten marks in a purse around his neck, made the journey alone across the Atlantic. Their mother, Brigitte, was ill and stayed behind for a year and a half before rejoining the family; their doctor father, Paul, who had left Russia for Germany after the revolution in 1917, had gone ahead to New York in 1938, just before the Nazi takeover, to set up a practice on the prosperous Upper West Side. On their first night off the ship, Nichols remembers seeing Hebrew writing on a delicatessen and asking his father in German, "Is that allowed?" He also remembers watching his brother throw a tantrum while his father "pretended to call the police on the pay phone to deal with him." "He had no experience as a father," Nichols says. "He had no idea what to do." Paul saw his boys only intermittently during their first year in America. He placed them with an English family, some patients of his who agreed to care for them while he was establishing himself. "They were awful," Nichols says. "They would kiss their own children good night, then shake our hands. We'd get a spoonful of milk of magnesia and go to bed." Things didn't improve much when the Peschkowsky family was reunited. "My parents fought all the time," Nichols recalls. "They would have divorced if my father hadn't died—something that my mother immediately forgot." Much later, Nichols learned that his father "was impotent with her and not with many other women." Both parents had a series of lovers. "There were always other people, in Germany and here," he says. "It was just the way things were."

Nichols felt "landlocked" in the family, trapped in the battle between his warring parents. A lot of the contention was about him. "I wouldn't go to school. I wouldn't get up in the morning. I answered back," Nichols says. He "had a mouth," which made both his schoolmates and his family wary of him. "My father wasn't too crazy about me," Nichols says. "I loved him anyway. One of the things I regretted for a long time was that he died before he could see that he would be proud of me. I was actually more what he wished for than he thought." He adds, "He could rage." (Nichols still remembers his father, in the heat of an unhappy family moment, saying to him and his brother, "I'll be glad to get rid of you two.") "But he also told funny stories, and he used to dance for us in his underwear. He did routines at parties that people loved to hear." In later life, Nichols was told by the impresario Sol Hurok, who had been one of Paul's patients, "You're not as funny as your father." And it's through his father that Nichols feels he understands the stoic bravado of Chekhov's characters. "He was the Russian as entertainer," he says. "What I loved him for—even when he wasn't noticeably loving me—was that he had great vitality and joy of life." Paul never let his darkness show in public. "I feel linked to him in many ways, and that's one of them," Nichols says.

By contrast, Brigitte, who was thirty-four when her husband died, at the age of forty-four, became "a nightmare of accusation," someone who collected injustices. "She was one of those people who would hold you responsible for everything that happened to her and how bad she felt now," Nichols says. He would try to kid her out of her misery. "Everything wounded her," he says. "She was always wounded to the quick. 'I raised you so you could say that to me? Thank you very much, I deserve that.' It went on for hours, days."

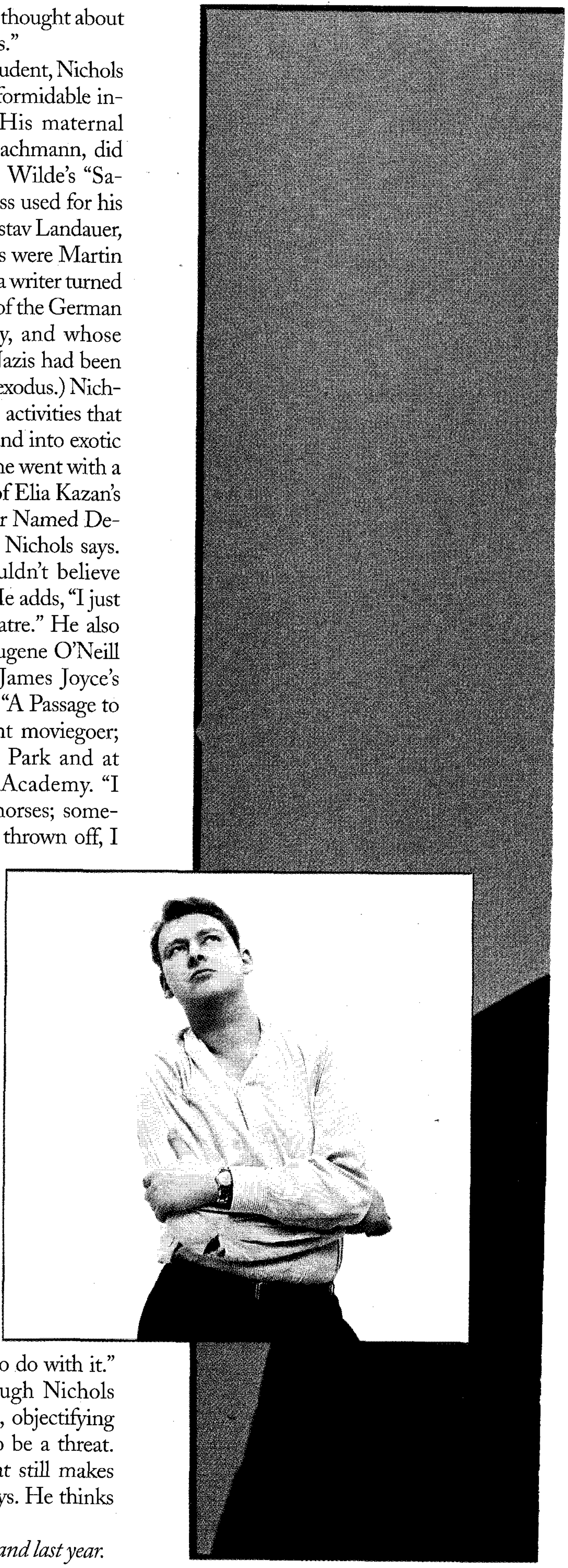
Brigitte, who had no profession, no money, no proper English, and only a few friends, would go to the Stanwood Cafeteria, on Broadway, and sit alone for hours. Over the years, she worked in a bakery, a bookshop, even set up a translation agency to support her boys. But after Paul was gone they found themselves plummeting well below the level of middle-class gentility to which they had been accustomed. Although Nichols blocked out the degree of their humiliating poverty, his brother subsequently reminded him of "bug-infested apartments" and of their mother "giving up to the point where she didn't do the laundry. We weren't clean." "She always had some mysterious illness," Nichols adds. When he went home after school to their drab rooms at 155 West Seventy-first Street—"one of those tiny apartment houses with podiatrists on the first floor"—he frequently found Brigitte propped up on her living-room sofa bed (the boys shared the bedroom) with a table of pills, "maybe a hundred and fifty bottles of medication, and the phone, on which she always was."

In time, Nichols discovered that he could make people laugh by telling stories about his mother. In fact, Nichols and May's definitive sketch, "Mother and Son" ("Someday . . . you'll have children of your own. And, honey, when you do, I only pray that they make you suffer the way you're making me. [*Sobs.*] That's all I pray, Arthur. That's a mother's prayer") was inspired by one of Brigitte's lethal phone calls. As Nichols recalls, it went, " 'Hello, Michael, this is your mother. Do you remember me?' I said, 'Mom, can I call you right back?' Literally. And I called Elaine." He and May were playing at the Blue Angel then. "I said, 'I have a piece for us.' I told her the line. She said, 'We'll do it tonight.' And we did it pretty much the way it is now. She had the identical mother."

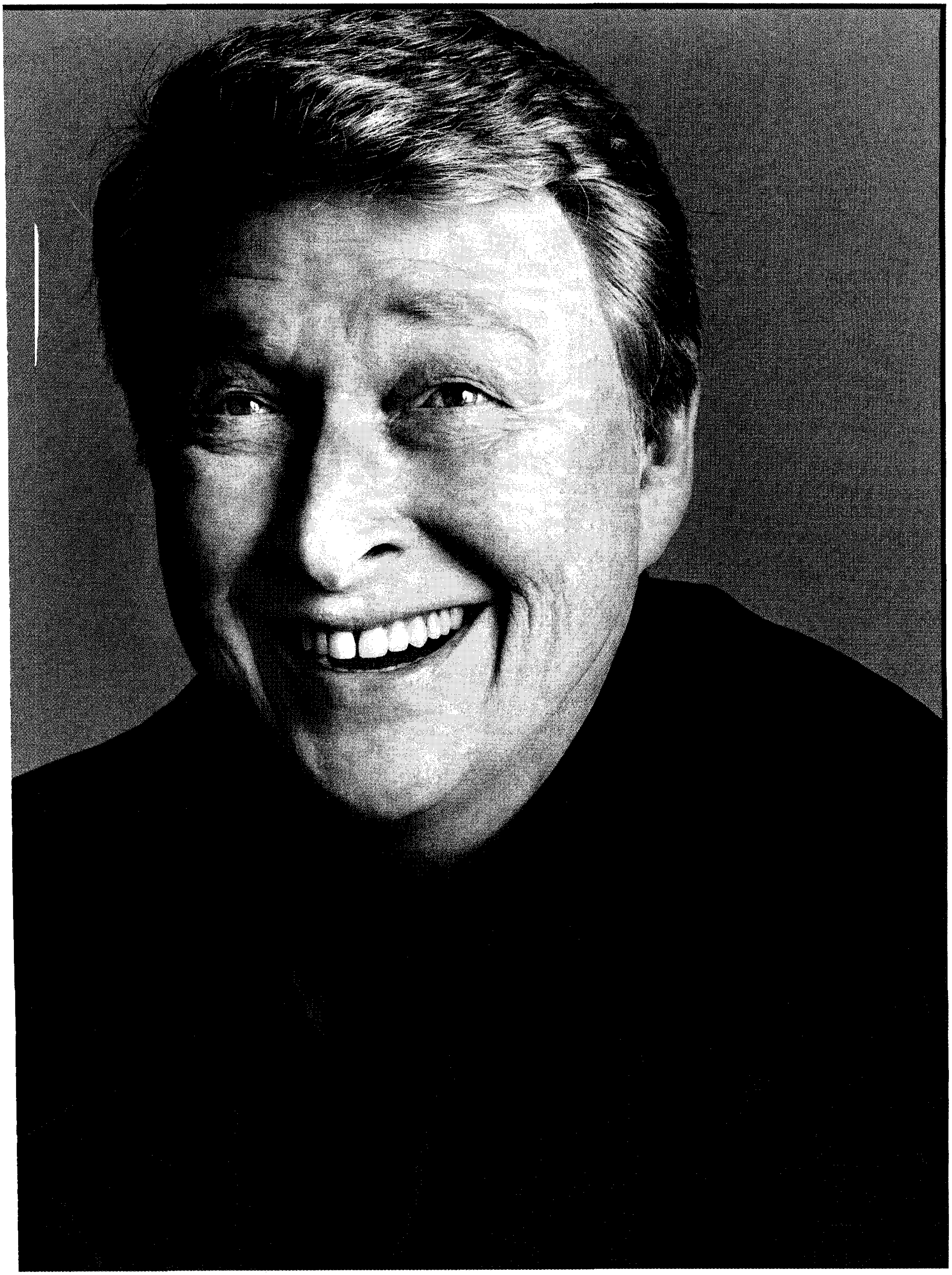
Before he found a way to make light of his difficulties, Nichols was swamped by them. From his first day at the Dalton School, on the Upper East Side, the clouds of exclusion and isolation glowered over him. "The kid was as far outside as an outsider can get," says Buck Henry, who was in his class. "He was Igor Peschkowsky when he was at Dalton. He did not speak English. He wore a cap all the time." Nichols says, "I remember being on the school bus in New York and saying, 'What means '*emergency*'?" By the time he reached high school (the progressive school Walden, from which he graduated in 1948), Nichols had mastered English, had a make-do wig, and had learned the idiom and style of his peers, but his assessment of himself during these "searing, painful years" was that he was "the most popular of the unpopular kids." "That was cast in bronze, that's where I was chained in the galaxy forever," he says. "I thought about revenge a lot in those days."

A lazy and lacklustre student, Nichols had a quick mind and a formidable intellectual inheritance. (His maternal grandmother, Hedwig Lachmann, did the translation of Oscar Wilde's "Salomé" that Richard Strauss used for his opera; his grandfather Gustav Landauer, among whose best friends were Martin Buber and B. Traven, was a writer turned activist, who was a leader of the German Social Democratic Party, and whose brutal execution by the Nazis had been the reason for the family's exodus.) Nichols filled his solitude with activities that took him out of himself and into exotic other worlds. At sixteen, he went with a date to the second night of Elia Kazan's production of "A Streetcar Named Desire." "We just sat there," Nichols says. "We didn't talk. We couldn't believe there was such a thing." He adds, "I just wanted to be around theatre." He also read voraciously (all of Eugene O'Neill by the age of fourteen, James Joyce's "Ulysses," E. M. Forster's "A Passage to India"); he was a constant moviegoer; he hung out in Central Park and at the Claremont Riding Academy. "I got to exercise people's horses; sometimes, when people were thrown off, I would catch the horses on the bridle path and ride them back." Animals calmed Nichols; unlike his classmates, they were responsive, unself-conscious, and unable to pass judgment. "The refugee ear is a sort of seismograph for how one is doing," Nichols says. At high school, he explains, "I *heard* what they thought of me—'nebbish,' 'poor boy'—and what they thought of each other. A thousand tiny victories and defeats in an ordinary conversation. I didn't know what to do with it."

To this day, even though Nichols wears a wig, the intrusive, objectifying eyes of others continue to be a threat. "Staring is something that still makes me absolutely nuts," he says. He thinks



"I know what the audience wants." Nichols in New York in 1960, inset, and last year.



of the public as "something to be controlled and tamed." "The first person to come up to me at a party is in danger to this day," Nichols says. "My reflex is to attack the first couple of people. I can't stop. Diane is right there, taking off the edges, fixing it. By the third or fourth person, I can be friendly." To Nichols, the audience has always personified Them—the annihilating mob of his childhood, whom he characterizes as "the beast" with "too much power." He says, "I was so impaled on what people thought. I had to train myself away from that. I never had a friend from the time I came to this country until I got to the University of Chicago. I was seventeen."

He ended up there by a fluke: it was one of the only schools in America that didn't require the College Boards, and Nichols hadn't taken them. "Once I got there, I had a very specific and powerful sense of 'Oh my God, look, there are others like me. There are other weirdos.' " The publisher Aaron Asher, who shared college digs with Nichols, says, "We were all freaks. We were way ahead of the country. There was sex. There was dope. There was a subculture." Asher was just one of Nichols's new friends, who were "refugees or first-generation Jewish intellectual guys." When Nichols mentioned to Asher that his grandmother had written the libretto for Strauss's "Salome," Asher joked, "Oh, really? Was she Hugo von Hofmannsthal?" Nichols says, "I was looking at somebody who knew who Hofmannsthal was and that he wrote libretti for Strauss. No such thing had ever happened to me before."

The first person Nichols met at registration was Susan Sontag; they struck up a lifelong friendship. "I thought he was terrific," Sontag says. "I adored him from the start. He was totally alive and incredibly verbal. We talked about books, about feelings, about how to get free of our pasts. Because we were interested in theatre, we were interested in observing people. I would happily have become his girlfriend physically, except I was intimidated by the hair problem and felt he was untouchable." (Thirty years later, Sontag confessed to Nichols that she couldn't accept the scars from her mastectomy: "I have this thing, and every time I take a bath I'm horrified." He said, "Susan, now you know how I have felt all my life.") Asher characterizes Nichols's look as "something out of a German Expressionist movie," but says that, "despite the strangeness of his appearance, he did very well with the girls. He was courtly, and he was well read, which got you a long way at that university."

Nichols, who had begun therapy, was also deeply depressed. "I would spend long times in my room and just not come out," he says. "Sometimes I would step over all the dishes and the Franco-American spaghetti cans and hang out with some friends, then go back to my lair." Nichols d.j.'ed a popular show of classical music and chat at WFMT, but his depression almost cost him the job. "He was funny and knowledgeable but totally unreliable," says Asher, whose cousin owned the station. "They fired him a number of times."

"I couldn't be a *person* that many hours a day," Nichols explains. "I needed—still need—a lot of time lying on the bed absolutely blank, the way I assume a dog is in front of the fire. A persona takes energy. I just needed a rest from it. Not to be anything in relation to anyone else."

When Nichols did emerge from seclusion, he worked up his losses into a kind of legend. According to one of his theatrical cohorts, quoted in Janet Coleman's "The Compass," Nichols behaved like "a princeling deprived of his rightful fortune." Nichols was so poor that he took to eating the leftovers from the coffee shop where the director Paul Sills was then a waiter. "He rattled his tin cup," Nichols's friend Hayward Ehrlich, now an associate professor of English at Rutgers, says. "When Mike appeared, you knew that he needed a cup of coffee or a sandwich or something. It became his way of relating to people, to have them sort of help him out of his impoverishment. I think Mike loved to magnify his sense of adversity so that in some way he could triumph over it."

Much to Nichols's surprise, during his sophomore year he found himself "near the center of the in-group" and "a minor celebrity." The theatrical talent pool at the University of Chicago was extraordinary: Sills, Ed Asner, Severn Darden, Anthony Holland, Zohra Lampert, Barbara Harris, Gene Troobnick. Nichols directed his first play, Yeats's "Purgatory," with Asner, and he performed in a number of plays, among them "Androcles and the Lion," "St. Joan," and "La Ronde." He played Jean the valet in a production of Strindberg's "Miss Julie," directed by Sills. "He wasn't the working-class man and couldn't come close to it," Sills says now. Nichols agrees; it was, he says, a "pathetic, awful production." He remembers "this evil, hostile girl in the front row staring at me throughout the performance. I was about four feet away from her and she stared at me all through it, and I knew she knew it was shit, and there was no way I could let her know that I knew." A few days later, the show mysteriously got a rave review in the Chicago *Daily News*. Nichols recalls rushing up to Sills on the street with the paper; Sills was with the girl who had unsettled Nichols from the audience. He scoured the review, while the girl read over his shoulder. "Ha!" she said, and walked away. Nichols, who was already toying with the notion of a theatrical career, had just met his future: Elaine May.

Some weeks later, on his way back from his disk-jockey gig, in the spring of 1954, Nichols caught sight of May in the waiting room of the Illinois Central's Randolph Street Station.

Their friendship began with an improvisation. "May I sit down?" he asked. In a thick Russian accent, May replied, "If you *veesh*." "Off she went," Nichols says. "She started us on that." They played out the scene, which Nichols characterized as "half spy, half pickup," all the way home. "I think I went home with her and she made me her specialty, which was hamburger with cream cheese and ketchup—the only thing she cooked," Nichols recalls. "She didn't know conventional dishes. She was utterly a rebel. That was part of the fun of it."

May was also a femme fatale. "Everybody wanted Elaine, and the people who got her couldn't keep her," Nichols says. But, even at their first meeting, which led to a brief romance, he remembers feeling that "we were safe from everyone else when we were with each other. And also safe from each other." He goes on, "I knew somehow that she would not do to me the things she'd done to other guys. I knew she wouldn't lose interest and move on. I knew instantly that everything that happened to us was ours."

May's life had been as painful and

complex as Nichols's. "It's almost hard to convey how neurotic we were," Nichols says. Although she had dropped out of high school at fourteen—the only thing she enjoyed there was diagramming sentences—May was, as Edmund Wilson noted in his diary when he fell under her dark-eyed spell in the late fifties, "something of a genius." She had grown up in a nomadic acting family, spending a good part of her childhood playing a little boy named Bennie in a travelling Yiddish theatre run by her father, Jack Berlin. According to her second husband, Sheldon Harnick, who wrote the lyrics for "Fiddler on the Roof," the death of May's beloved father when she was ten left her to a future of apprehensive relations with men. She was married for the first time at sixteen; by eighteen she had a child, Jeannie Berlin, who was about four years old when Nichols met May and was being raised in Los Angeles by May's mother. By the time she reached Chicago, May had studied acting, performed a hillbilly act under the name Elly May, and written advertising copy. May, who saw herself primarily as a writer, was unofficially auditing courses at the University of Chicago and trying to develop a screen treatment of Plato's Symposium. (She once convinced a philosophy class that everyone in the Symposium was drunk and that that was the point of Plato's discourse.) "The only safe thing is to take a chance," May always told Nichols, who was ravished by her daring and her quirkiness.

Nichols and May had talent, but, more important, they had chemistry. They were quick; they were guarded; they were crazy. They were also "insanely judgmental" snobs, bound together, Nichols says, "by tremendous hostility to everyone else but never to each other." (May once said, according to Nichols, "that if somebody told her that I had burned down her house with her whole family in it, she would say, 'Oh, I must ask Michael why he did that.' ") "I feel in opposition to almost everything," May, who no longer gives interviews, said in a Profile of the duo published in this magazine in 1961. Like Nichols, she used wit as a pesticide, and her juicy good looks were a particularly disconcerting contrast to her sharp tongue. Once, Nichols recalls, when two men followed her down the street making kissing sounds, May

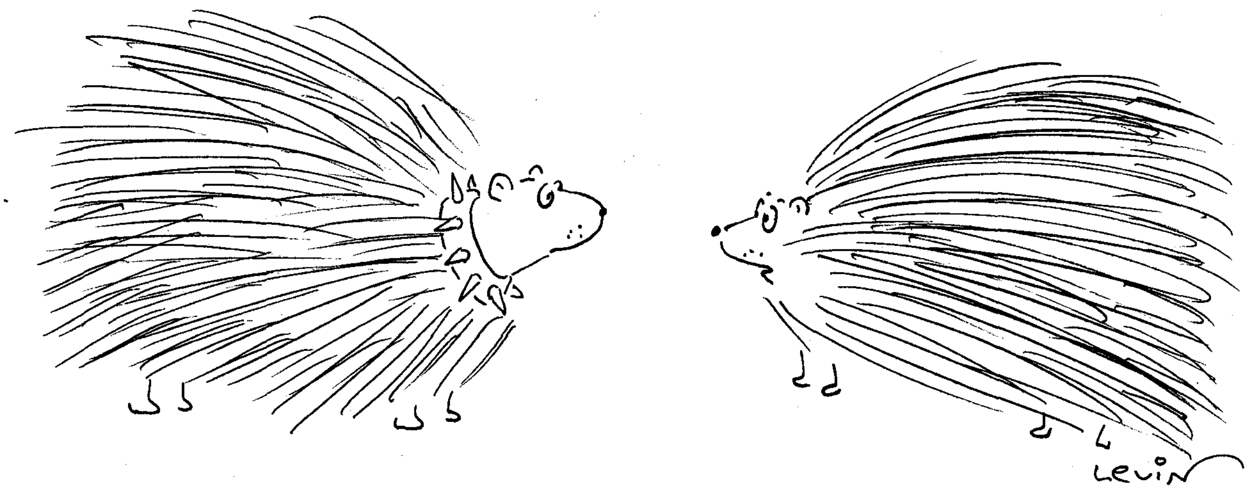
TAKES

RICHARD MERKIN

Then came a year when I felt the urge to push on still farther and explore the vast marshland beyond the River Oredezh. After skirting the bank for three or four miles, I found a rickety footbridge. While crossing over, I could see the huts of a hamlet on my left, apple trees, rows of tawny pine logs lying on a green slope, and the bright patches made on the turf by the scattered clothes of peasant girls, who, stark naked, romped in the shallow water and yelled, heeding me as little as if I were the discarnate carrier of my present reminiscences. On the other side of the river, a dense crowd of small, bright-blue butterflies that had been tippling on the rich, trampled mud and cow dung through which I had to trudge rose all together into the spangled air and settled again as soon as I had passed.

After making my way through some pine groves and alder scrub, I came to the swamp. No sooner had my ear caught the hum of Diptera around me, the cry of a snipe overhead, the gulping sounds of the morass under my foot than I knew I would find here quite special arctic butterflies, the pictures of which I had worshipped for several seasons. And the next moment I was among them. Over the bilberry shrubs, with their dim, dreamy blue fruit, over the brown eye of stagnant water, over moss, over mire, over the fragrant racemes of the lone and mysterious marsh rocket, a dark little Fritillary, bearing the name of a Norse goddess, passed in a low, skimming flight. I pursued rose-margined Sulphurs, gray-stippled Satyrs. Unmindful of the mosquitoes that covered my forearms and neck, I stooped with a grunt of delight to snuff out the life of some silver-studded lepidopteron throbbing in the folds of my net. Through the smells of the marsh, I caught the subtle perfume of butterfly wings on my hands, a perfume that varies with the species; it may be vanilla, or lemon, or musk, or a musty, sweetish odor difficult to define. Still unsated, I pressed forward. At last, I saw I had come to the end of the swamp. The rising ground beyond was a paradise of lupines, columbines, and pentstemons. Mariposa lilies bloomed under the ponderosa pines. In the distance, fleeting cloud shadows dappled the olive green of slopes above timber line, and the gray and white of Longs Peak.

—Vladimir Nabokov
"Butterflies," June 12, 1948



"I think it's overkill."

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turned on them and said, "What's the matter? Tired of each other?" "Fuck you!" one of them shouted at her. May turned and faced the guy. "With what?" she said.

Nichols dropped out of college in 1953, and, in 1954, he decamped to New York to study the Method with Lee Strasberg. "I have decided that if I don't make it as a nervous young man," he wrote to a Chicago friend, "I will wait and become like Robert Morley, who is clearly the funniest man in the world." But in 1955, with no prospect of work, he returned to Chicago with the promise of twenty-eight dollars a week as part of a new company called the Compass Players, of which Sills and May were founding members. The goal of the Compass, which would evolve into Chicago's legendary Second City, was to do away with conventional plays and make theatre by improvisational means. "I was terrified of improvising," Nichols says. "I didn't even know what it was. I hated it, and I was very bad at it." Nichols cried in his scenes for months "because that's what I thought I'd learned from Strasberg. Paul and Elaine kept me going. The fact of Elaine—her presence—kept me doing it."

In the first successful scene they did together, Nichols played a riding instructor, and May his pupil. "We both realized as we got into the middle of the scene that I would get to stand in the middle of the stage and watch her cantering as both horse and rider around me." During the scene, a member of the cast ran into the bar where the other actors were congregated, shouting, "Come quick! Mike has a character!" Nichols reflects, "What is implied in that story—and it was true for the first time in my life—is affection. They had some affection for me. I began to understand that I could be kidded, and people could be fond of me, and that this would all be a pleasurable thing."

As intellectual high-wire acts go, there is no riskier or more astounding enterprise than going out in front of an audience and creating something out of nothing. "You're showing off how smart you are, how good you are," Buck Henry says. "You have the pleasure of having not only performed it but written it at the same time." Improvisation—a process, Nichols says, that "absorbs you, creates you, and saves you"—allowed the actors to stay on the edge of emotion and character without connecting deeply to their interior lives, and this suited both Nichols's and May's private natures. "I would never have been a performer without her, and I don't think she would have without me," Nichols says. "Elaine and I are, in some weird way, each other's unconscious." Nichols made the shapes; May filled them in. "She was shockingly, endlessly inventive. She could go on and on—I couldn't," Nichols says. "I did my jokes, and then I was through."

Within the Compass Players, May could be funny with several different actors, but Nichols could be funny only with her. "I never did a good scene of any kind with anybody else," Nichols told Jeff Sweet, in "Something Wonderful Right Away," an oral history of the Compass Players. "For me, it depended on a certain connection with Elaine and a certain mad gleam in either her or my eyes when we knew something was starting." The mad gleam meant, as he explained to me, "Oh, fuck, I know where you're going. That's a great idea you've just had, and when you get there I'll be ready." That focus—reminiscent of a parent's empowering gaze—was inspiring. "We had to figure out something or we would disappear, each of us," Nichols adds. (He would later find a similar containing attentiveness in Diane Sawyer. "All of her is available all the time," he says.) With May, Nichols could drop his mask. "*I* interested me when I was with her," he says. "It wasn't only that she was so great but that when I was with her I became something more than I had been."

Onstage, in their own version of Truth or Dare, Nichols and May kept upping the ante on each other. Once, in an improv about an egotistical d.j. and a starlet called Barbara Musk, Nichols quizzed May about her next movie. "My latest motion picture is . . . called 'Two Gals in Paris.' It is the life story of Gertrude Stein," May said. "What do you play in the picture, sweetheart?" Nichols asked. "Well, I was really just lucky enough to get the part of Gertrude Stein," she said. "I had heard that Gertrude Stein was going to be played by Spencer Tracy," Nichols said, maneuvering her into a tough spot. "Only as a child," May shot back. When the conversation got onto the soundtrack of the movie, May said that she'd recorded the title song. Nichols promptly asked her to sing it. On the spot, May ad-libbed an entire song, which ended:

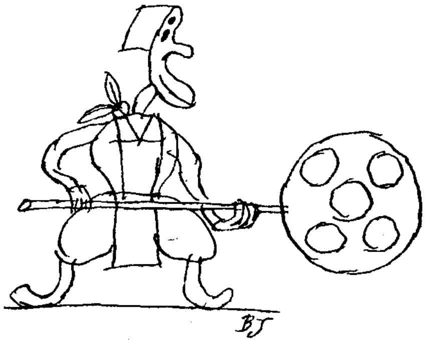
> There was dashing Dmitri, elusive Ivan
> And Alyosha with the laughing eyes.
> Then came the dawn
> The brothers were gone
> I just can't forget those wonderful guys.

The University of Chicago proved the perfect place for nurturing their particular ironic and informed voices. "It was the most referential community that I think ever existed in this country," says Nichols, who improvised entire scenes in the style of writers suggested by the audience. "At the Compass, we could drop 'Dostoyevsky' as a name and get a laugh. We were living in the context in which the referential joke was just the highest currency." They were also coming of age in a "safer, quieter place" than New York. "Chicago is not a city of fashion, nor is it full of pride and excitement over its art," Nichols says. "They were very calm about Compass. They came. They laughed. They went home."

Nichols and May were beginning to find resources in themselves that they hadn't known they had, including the ability to make anger work for them. "Rage is the best engine, of course, if you have a tremendous gift to employ it properly," Nichols wrote to a friend. Once, when Nichols was performing a sketch about pretentious snobs at a private party, the actor playing the effete host offered to put on a record. "Would you like to hear 'The Four Seasons'?" he asked. "Perhaps just 'Winter,' " Nichols replied. "To freeze his ass was a pleasure," says Nichols, who found that with jokes he could "cow the shit" out of the public. "When a joke comes to you, it feels like it's been sent by God." He adds, "What it is, really, is discovering your unconscious."

There were other discoveries. When Nichols was onstage, even the "curse" of imagining what others thought of him became an asset: "I could hear what the other actors were thinking, where they were going, what the audience was thinking." Nichols also learned "the Aristotelian things" about the building of a scene—conflict, theme, resolution. He and May found ways to "grab the opposite." "There had to be a core to a scene," Nichols told Jeff Sweet. "It didn't matter how clever the lines were. If they weren't hung on a situation, you were only as good as your last line. . . . But if you could grab a situation, whether it was a seduction or a conflict or a fight, once you had that spine, then things could come out of it." And when the jokes were found, Nichols husbanded them. "If there was a laugh to be gotten and Elaine didn't set up the feed line, Mike would work with her until she did," another Compass member, the comedian Shelley Berman, said. "He did everything but lasso her." For a while, according to Janet Coleman, Nichols and May worked with Berman, a trio that May suggested they call "Two Cocksuckers and Elaine." "I actually liked Shelley," Nichols said. "But one day he came offstage and said, 'Hey, guys, Mike had three scenes in that set, and I only had two.' It was a whole new idea in Eden to count. The group was finished in six months."

Nichols and May themselves nearly foundered in 1958, when they were working in St. Louis, where a new Compass Players venue had been launched. Nichols had recently married the Chicago TV personality and singer Pat Scot ("Isn't it a beautiful first wedding?" May said at the ceremony), who joined him on weekends. During the week, on a strictly platonic basis, Nichols and May shared a room, which she vacated when Scot arrived. On those days, May stayed with another company member, Del Close. Nichols was jealous of Close, not for romantic reasons but because May was so much a part of his identity that he couldn't share her. "I persecuted the shit out of Del," Nichols says. "Nothing could stop me. Elaine finally said to the producer, 'I can't stand it anymore—you've got to fire Michael.' " Nichols was summarily fired.



Some weeks later, from New York, where he had gone with Scot (though, as May had predicted, the marriage didn't last much longer), Nichols called to ask May if she'd like to audition with him for the New York agent Jack Rollins. Rollins handled such cabaret talent as Harry Belafonte and Woody Allen. "They were immediately astounding. They were complete," Rollins says, of the first time he set eyes on the team, at his office in the Pierre Hotel. "He is Mr. Practical. She is insanely creative. But Mike is the one that made the act live in this world." By the following Tuesday, Nichols and May were playing the Village Vanguard. "A couple of weeks later, we were on 'Steve Allen,' " Nichols says. "Then we were on 'Omnibus,' and we were very famous. The whole thing took about two months." After the "Omnibus" show, Nichols remembers calling May at 4 A.M. to say, "What do we do now?"

As McCarthyism, the Cold War, and racial unrest made their generation anxious, Nichols and May struck a new disenchanted chord in American life. "Nobody was doing any humor about post-Korean War young people, that urban generation," says the cartoonist and playwright Jules Feiffer, who, when he first heard them, "didn't dare laugh, because I was afraid of missing something." He adds, "Humor was Bob Hope still. When I saw Mike and Elaine, suddenly you felt not just that this is funny but that this is true." Woody Allen, who wanted to write for Nichols and May, says that comedians like them "were touching on some kind of truth—truth of character, social truth, truth of wit. And, suddenly, part of that whole new sense of truth was that they wrote their own material." With Nichols and May, Jewish angst, Freud, literacy, irony, and sex were ushered into the discourse of mainstream comedy. They, along with Mort Sahl, Jonathan Winters, and, later, Lenny Bruce and Woody Allen, were the renegades who led comedy away from the ersatz to the authentic. "The nice thing is to make an audience laugh and laugh and laugh and shudder later," May said. The frisson was the shock of recognition. Nichols and May had the uncanny ability at once to comment on character and to fill it from within. "They were like music," Steve

Martin says, referring to the swift intimacy of their overlapping rhythms, the deft interplay of May's soft, breathless voice and the reedy clarity of Nichols's sound. For instance, in their sendup of public outrage over Charles Van Doren and the "Twenty-One" scandal:

NICHOLS: Thank heaven for the investigation.
MAY: Oh, yes.
NICHOLS: When I feel worst I say to myself, "At least the government has taken a firm stand."
MAY: Oh, yes. Well, they can't fool around with this the way they did with integration.
NICHOLS: No.
MAY: This is a . . .
NICHOLS: . . . moral issue.
MAY: Yes.
NICHOLS: A moral issue.
MAY: *Yes! Yes!* It is a moral issue.
NICHOLS: A moral issue.
MAY: And to me that is so much more interesting than a *real* issue.

"Smart is not necessarily funny," Martin says. "You can go through a whole evening of smart and have laughed completely perfunctorily." But Nichols and May could be approached from either a dopey or a smart place. For example, their classic sketch about two teen-agers smoking and making out in the front seat of a car contained two pieces of inspired physical business: May in the middle of a passionate kiss opening her mouth to breathe and emitting a puff of smoke (a joke Nichols later used in "The Graduate"), and the clinching lovers trying to pass a cigarette from one trapped hand to another.

However, sometimes smart alone could bring down the house. Nichols began his sendup of Tennessee Williams—a high-pitched, hard-drinking Southern playwright called Alabama Glass—with the playwright explaining his newest work to the audience. "Before the action of the play *begins*," Nichols drawled, "Nanette's husband, Raoul, has committed *suicide* on bein' unjustly accused of *not* bein' homosexual."

"Most of the time, people thought we were making fun of others when we were making fun of ourselves," Nichols says. "Pretentiousness. Snobbiness. Horniness. Elaine was parodying her mother, as I was mine, and a certain girlishness, flirtatiousness in herself." He adds, "It was utterly freeing." And redeeming. In the teen-ager sketch, for instance, Nichols and May were sending up the cheerleader and the football star, those high-school paragons they never were but now got to play. "We *were* those people, and it healed something, weird as it sounds," Nichols says. Onstage with May, Nichols felt, "I could be anybody I needed to be. I used to have a mental image of cracking a whip when I was talking to the audience. I could control them with jokes." Offstage, the person he presented as Mike Nichols was another version of his stage persona—witty and apparently able to handle everything. " 'We'd like to say a few words about adultery—it's coming back.' That's who I was." He adds, "You start imitating somebody who is calm about all that. You imitate it long enough, and it becomes true."

But, while his public persona stanched old anxieties, success brought new ones. May cared more about process, Nichols more about results. "She was always brave," he says of her desire to improvise. "But I became more and more afraid. I wasn't happy with getting paid a fortune for something and not having tried it out in advance." By the late fifties, Nichols was earning more than half a million dollars a year. He adds, "The audience didn't give a shit whether you were improvising or not. They'd come to see good comedy."

The team's creative differences came to a head in their brilliant Broadway show, "An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May" (1960), which I saw during its yearlong run. "We were irreproachable," Nichols says. "We never got a negative review. We never had an empty seat. Everybody loved us. Everybody felt they had discovered us." But discovery—the fearless adventure of creating in the moment—was gradually being leached out of their performances by the repetition of set routines. May grew increasingly unhappy. "Sometimes she'd be late. What is so difficult? Two hours out of twenty-four. It's a perfect job. It wasn't that way for her," Nichols says. "We had huge fights about it. I never could understand why she found it so difficult."

The most stunning moment of the evening—a kind of augury of their collapse—was a sketch called "Pirandello," a twenty-minute exercise in which Nichols and May began as two little kids, playing at insulting each other like Mom and Dad, then became Mom and Dad yelling at each other, and then turned into a pair of actors having trouble with each other onstage. Suddenly, in a terrifying shift, Nichols and May were in the middle of some ugly private squabble. At one point, in what Buck Henry characterizes as "a moment of unbelievably intense embarrassment for everyone," Nichols turned to the audience and said, "My partner and I . . ." May said, "Well, screw this," and started to walk offstage. Nichols grabbed at her, ripping May's blouse as she pulled away. She started to cry. "Michael, what do you think you're doing?" she said. "I'm doing 'Pirandello,' " Nichols said. Breaking into smiles, they took their bows. But at one performance Nichols and May actually came to blows: Nichols hit her back and forth across the face, May clawed at his chest until it bled, and the curtain had to be brought down. "We cried together. It didn't happen again," he says. "I think, in many ways, I persecuted her. I went on at her, 'This is too slow, this has to go faster.' "

The end was slow in coming. In October, 1962, Nichols took the lead in May's play "A Matter of Position," which opened in Philadelphia. "It was sort of about me, which she never quite admitted," Nichols says. But, with him on the stage and May in the audience, the balance of their relationship irrevocably shifted. "Suddenly, Elaine was not next to me, doing it with me, but out there judging me," Nichols says. "It was horrendous." The play itself added to the atmosphere of fiasco. As the Philadelphia *Sunday Bulletin* wrote, "Those members of the audience who had not already beat a hasty retreat before the final curtain, as many did, were left with a sensation of numbness that was too far down to be attributed to heartburn." Nichols and May were no longer two against the world. May was looking for a replacement for Nichols, and Nichols was saying to people, "Get her to cut the play or I'm leaving." The play died in Philadelphia; and, although they didn't exactly speak the words, so did their friendship. "It was cataclysmic," Nichols says.

"Mike was in a state of deep depression," says Robby Lantz, Nichols's theatrical agent at the time. "He really wasn't functioning. He went to bed. Period." Nichols was now half of a comedy team. He had lost his best friend, his livelihood, and the scaffolding of his identity. "Mike has no tolerance for failure," says a former collaborator who tried to rally him after May’s departure. “I didn’t know what I was or who I was,” Nichols explains. His predicament was summed up one afternoon on Park Avenue by Leonard Bernstein, a member of the deluxe set he’d become part of. Bernstein put his arm around Nichols. “Oh, Mikey,” he said, “you’re so good. I don’t know at what, but you’re so good.”

What Nichols was good at, it turned out, was something that his acting classes with Strasberg, his improvising, and his comedy act with May had all been a preparation for: directing. In 1961, in New Jersey, he’d directed a collection of Jules Feiffer cartoon sketches, “The World of Jules Feiffer,” with music by Stephen Sondheim. “It was clear to me that he was extraordinary,” Feiffer says. But it was not clear to the producing fraternity or to Nichols. As an apprenticeship, Lantz sent him on what Nichols calls “the lamest possible job,” to direct Wilde’s “The Importance of Being Earnest” and play the Dauphin in Shaw’s “St. Joan,” at a Vancouver theatre festival. “Every night at midnight he called and said, ‘Get me out of this. I don’t want to do this,’ ” Lantz recalls. “I said, ‘This is precisely what the doctor ordered.’ ” And so it proved. The Broadway producer Arnold Saint-Subber was shopping for a director for Neil Simon’s “Nobody Loves Me.” Although Saint-Subber didn’t have enough confidence to guarantee the tyro director the Broadway show, he was prepared to let Nichols try out the play in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Nichols had only seven days to mount “Nobody Loves Me,” which was later retitled “Barefoot in the Park.”

After the first reading at Saint-Subber’s house, when none of the actors laughed, the notoriously nervous Simon, known as Doc because of his ability to swiftly rewrite a line and make brilliant comic fixes, wanted to call off the play. Nichols was unruffled. “The play was so light, so sweet, so funny, that my job was to make it real,” says Nichols, who impressed Simon with his extraordinary calmness. “I was absolutely confident about what everything should be and where everybody should be.” Nichols told his talented cast—Robert Redford, Elizabeth Ashley, Mildred Natwick, Kurt Kasznar—to treat the play as if it were “King Lear.” “Let’s do it as though we don’t know what’s going to happen,” Nichols remembers telling the cast. “Let’s not let them know it’s funny.”

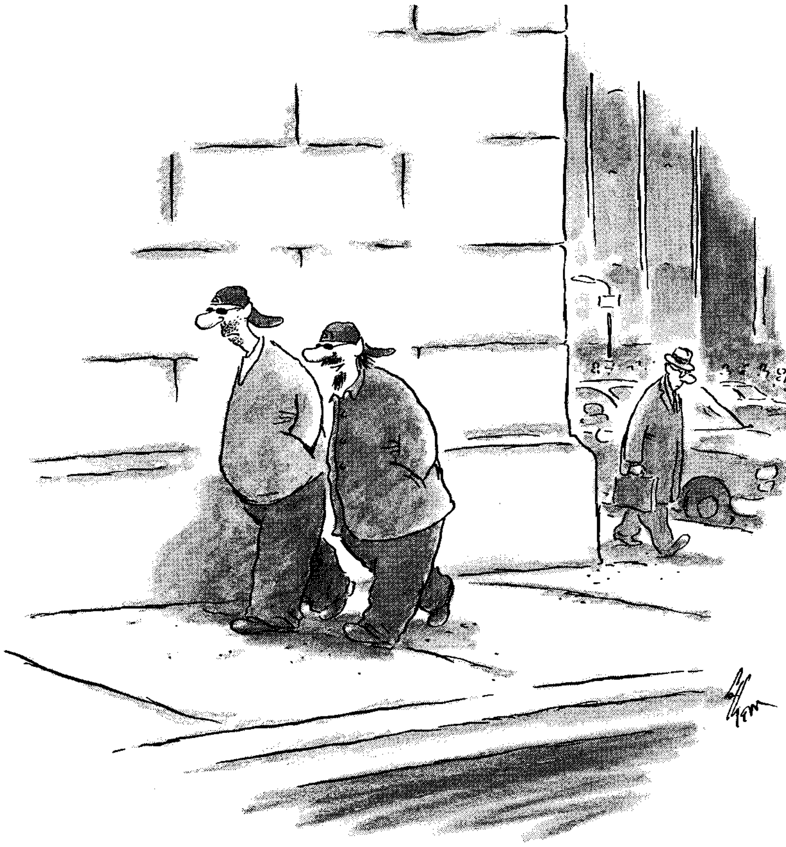
But it was Simon who didn’t know that his play was funny. At the first Bucks County rehearsal, he sat outside the rehearsal hall. “Suddenly, I heard a roar,” Simon says. “ ‘Thank God, they must be up to a good part.’ I went inside. It was Mike telling them a story during the break. Then we went back to the play—no more laughs.”

“Doc said, ‘Let’s call it off. This is not a play. I never thought it was a play,’ ” Nichols recalls. “I said, ‘Let’s decide after the first preview. Let’s just see how it is with an audience.’ Of course, they yelled and screamed and fell out of their chairs. Doc never worried again.” Nichols adds, “I had instant maturity.”

This marked the beginning of what is probably the most successful commercial partnership in twentieth-century American theatre. “We were obsessed in the same way,” Nichols says of Simon. “I could wake him up at two in the morning and say, ‘I’ve figured out what’s wrong with the third act,’ and he would curse me and then come down and meet me in the lobby to listen to it. It was the joy of discovering things together.”

As a comedian, Nichols had watched himself become what he calls “a show-biz baby.” “I was narcissistic,” he says. “I would get mad. I bitched about our billing. I did all the things I dislike. Comedy is the only work in the world in which the work and the reward are simultaneous. Comedians get it on the spot. They get the laugh. It’s very corrupting to your character.” But as a director Nichols got to play adult instead of baby. “There was something about serving something that wasn’t me,” Nichols says. Within fifteen minutes of starting rehearsal for “Barefoot in the Park,” he had a life-changing revelation: the experience of taking care of others made him feel taken care of. “I had a sense of enormous relief and joy that I had found a process that both gave me my father back and allowed me to be my father and the group’s father,” he says.

Nichols’s love for his actors was palpable; he created a protective environment for them. “They’re giving everyone the right to assess, evaluate, criticize ev-



“Have you ever wanted something so bad that you’d actually save up the money to buy it?”

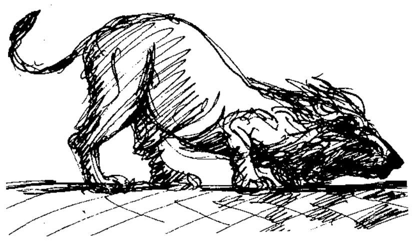
erything about them—their noses, their asses, their intelligence, their worthiness or lack of worthiness," he says. "They're really out there." Nichols was a shrewd father—clever about wielding his authority and about maintaining boundaries. During "Barefoot in the Park," Redford came to Nichols in a quandary: he was being upstaged by the showy Elizabeth Ashley. "I can't bear it," he told Nichols. "Every night when I kiss Ashley, she kicks her leg up behind her. I feel like I've been used. I'm embarrassed." "Why don't you do it, too?" Nichols suggested. Redford did as he was told and got a huge laugh; Ashley promptly stopped her upstaging.

Some of Nichols's charges could be notoriously bumptious. Sometimes he tamed them with his high-definition humor. Once, during a heated rehearsal of "The Odd Couple," Walter Matthau looked out at Nichols in the auditorium and said, "Mike, can I have my cock back now?" "Props!" Nichols said. With other wayward actors, like George C. Scott, he knew when to be politic. During the rehearsals of "Plaza Suite," Scott disappeared for three days. "We're in the middle of a scene, and George walks in. Collar up—it's winter—hands in coat pockets. He's just standing there looking at us," Simon recalls. "I look at Mike, and I'm anxious to hear what he's gonna say. Mike said, 'Hi, George. We're on Act II, page twenty-one.'" On the other hand, Nichols could be strict about certain kinds of behavior. At an early rehearsal of "The Prisoner of Second Avenue," the cast, which included Peter Falk and Lee Grant, was blocking a scene on the stage of the Plymouth Theatre. "One of the actresses said, 'Mike, if she stands over there, I don't think this part of the house is gonna see me,'" Simon recalls. "Mike turned and whispered to the producer, 'Fire her.'"

Nichols's authority rested, in large part, on his unique understanding of the audience. Onstage, and later in film, his work sought—some would say too eagerly—to speak to the audience in a popular way. At its best, this sensibility produced "The Odd Couple," one of the century's classic comedies. At its most indulgent, it allowed Robin Williams, as Estragon in "Waiting for Godot" (1988), to break the play's artifice of isolation and ad-lib with the paying customers. "The experience of living in front of the audience for all those years in Chicago did something to me," Nichols says. "It gave me some closeness to them, some trust." His sensitivity to audience reaction was the issue in a dramatic falling-out he had with David Rabe, whose play "Streamers" was probably Nichols's greatest artistic triumph—a beautifully staged and terrifying barracks tale of homosexual baiting. When it came to Rabe's next play, the powerful "Hurlyburly," Nichols explains, "I was desperate for him to cut. I kept saying, 'I won't do this to the audience.' I could not get him to see the show from the audience; he only saw it from the light booth." Rabe, who finally went mute in protest ("He couldn't reach me. I was not listening," Rabe told me), stayed with the show until it opened but spoke hardly a word to Nichols. Nichols won the argument and the cut play was a success, but it cost him their relationship.

Improvisation had given Nichols another invaluable directorial impulse: "To damn well pick something that would happen in the scene—an Event." As Nichols explains it, the Event in any scene subliminally seeks an agreement with the audience on the human experience. "While you're expressing what happens, you're also saying underneath, 'Do we share this? Are you like me in any way? Oh, look, you are. You laughed!'" The building of this agreement through observation and detailed comic business was Nichols's signature: Art Carney, in "The Odd Couple," suddenly single and so nervous on his first date that when he lights the woman's cigarette he closes his Zippo on it; the newlywed Elizabeth Ashley, in "Barefoot in the Park," who knows nothing about housekeeping, holding a match to a log in the fireplace, or slamming from room to room in a passionate argument with her husband while simultaneously undressing.

Nichols has a gift for making things real. During the tryouts for "Barefoot in the Park," he and Simon stood at the back of the theatre watching a scene in which the bride, after a week of marriage, screams that she wants a divorce. "I said to Mike, 'I don't think we should be watching this,'" Simon recalls. "He said, 'Why not?' I said, 'It's too personal, what they're doing on the stage.' And Mike says, 'Good, I'm glad you like it.'"



Between 1963 and 1984, Nichols chalked up about a dozen Broadway hits in a row, half of them with Simon. "Over and over again, he'd say when everybody was getting nervous, 'It's only a play. They're not going to be waiting for you in front of your house with torches,'" recalls Simon, whose hit play "The Sunshine Boys" was a script that he had abandoned until Nichols encouraged him to complete it. But one thing about theatre did make Nichols nervous: seeing his stage business and his contributions to scripts go into movie versions without remuneration. He was the first director to demand, and get, a share of the author's royalties, which, when added to his director's royalty and his piece of the subsidiary rights, quickly made Nichols a very rich man. (According to his accountant, if all his stock and film income were lost, he could still "live comfortably" on his production royalties.) "I wasn't pleased with giving it to him, but I can't argue with it," Simon says. "I would rather have him do it and have the play be great. I never worked with anyone in my life—nor will I ever work with anyone—as good as Mike Nichols. And, when you talk about percentages, what Mike asked for was more than made up for by what I made on 'The Sunshine Boys.'"

Money played a large part in how Nichols measured his achievement. "He always pushed with agents—I speak for us all: more money, more power, more billing," Robby Lantz says. "Eventually, the demands became cruel. Artists in the theatre should not take from each other things that are not necessary." But Nichols, who had almost been wiped out in his first show-biz incarnation, was building an unassailable second career. "The butterflies in my stomach won't stop fluttering until I have thirty million dollars," the producer Lewis Allen overheard Nichols telling Lillian Hellman. "He's ruthless when he wants to be, or sometimes maybe even when he doesn't want to be," Lantz says. "He doesn't let anything stand in his way."

Nichols was also avid for artistic excellence, which he needed power to protect. He learned this lesson in his first taste of Hollywood, in the mid-sixties. Elizabeth Taylor had chosen Nichols to direct her in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," even though she had never seen or read the play: she trusted, she said, Nichols's sense of the tragic, which she'd intuited from their friendship. And it was Taylor whom Nichols invoked when Jack Warner, reversing production plans, insisted on shooting in color. As Nichols recalls, "I said, 'Mr. Warner, it's impossible for several reasons. The sets are built. Elizabeth's thirty-three years old—her makeup will never withstand color. How can she go from thirty-three to fifty-six and have us believe the makeup in color?' " But Warner insisted. The screenwriter and the producer, Ernest Lehman, whom Nichols sardonically nicknamed Slugger, said nothing. "Well, O.K., I'll tell you what," Nichols told him. "You make it in color. I'll go home. I like it at home." Warner immediately conceded: "All right, black-and-white," he said. "After that, he treated me very kindly," Nichols says. "Until he threw me off the picture at the end. When it was mixing time, he saved time and trouble and just had his crew mix it."

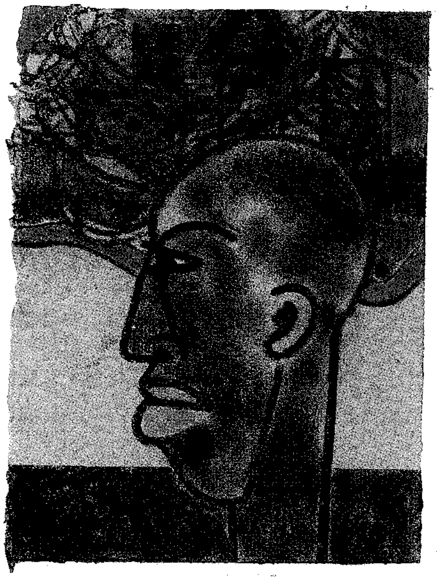
But even here Nichols had unexpected leverage. Each night from the set, the editor, Sam O'Steen, would play him the sound mix over the phone and Nichols would give him notes on what to change. Finally, Nichols got word to Warner that he wanted to cut a deal. Warner was worried that the film, which was about adultery, drunkenness, and brutal family battles, would not be approved by the powerful Catholic Legion of Decency. In exchange for being allowed back on the set, Nichols came up with a plan to deliver the Legion: "When the Monsignor sees the picture, Jackie Kennedy will sit behind him. When it's over, she will say, 'How Jack would have loved it!' " Jackie Kennedy did as her friend asked; Warner got the Legion's blessing; and Nichols duly finished his film, the first film ever for which all of the four leading players were nominated for Oscars.

Nichols, whose film technique is not showy, is a director's director. "He tends

TAKES

When I was very young, and was dealing with my buddies in those wine-and-urine-stained hallways, something in me wondered, *What will happen to all that beauty*? For black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful. And when I sat at Elijah's table and watched the baby, the women, and the men, and we talked about God's—or Allah's—vengeance, I wondered, when that vengeance was achieved, *What will happen to all that beauty then*? I could also see that the intransigence and ignorance of the white world might make that vengeance inevitable—a vengeance that does not really depend on, and cannot really be executed by, any person or organization, and that cannot be prevented by any police force or army: historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance, based on the law that we recognize when we say, "Whatever goes up must come down." And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*

—*James Baldwin*
Letter from a Region in My Mind,
November 17, 1962



RICHARD MERKIN

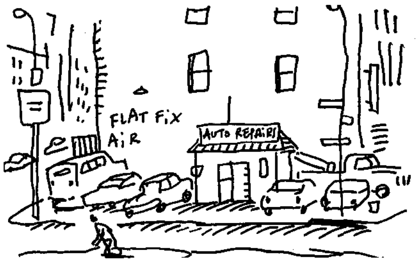
to get actors to give him their finest hours," Steven Spielberg says, citing Kathy Bates's long monologue in "Primary Colors." For Nichols, who himself gave a tour-de-force performance in Wallace Shawn's "The Designated Mourner," at London's Royal National Theatre in 1996, the director's job is to help the actors turn psychology into behavior. When Nichols talks to actors and to students at the New Actors Workshop, which he founded with Paul Sills and George Morrison, in 1988, he is generally oblique, offering up examples from his own life to clarify a theatrical moment. "You kind of just free-associate all day long," says the writer-director Nora Ephron, who worked with Nichols on "Silkwood" and "Heartburn." "Then suddenly you get something that actually is good enough to find its way into the thing you're working on." The veteran director Billy Wilder says, "Mike's scenes have a kind of inner content, which the audience feels and follows. He's very lucid." "What you're looking for every day is one little surprise," Nichols told Charlie Rose about directing. "It's like seeding a cloud and hoping it will rain."

The process requires patience, luck, and a gentle touch. Once, during the casting of "Carnal Knowledge," Jules Feiffer, who wrote the script, told Nichols that he was worried about putting the twenty-three-year-old Candice Bergen in the lead. "Can she act?" Feiffer asked. "Mike said, 'She'll act for me.' And she did." In his recent biography of Edward Albee, Mel Gussow quotes Richard Burton (who played the harried professor in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?") on Nichols. "He appears to defer to you, then in the end he gets exactly what he wants. He conspires with you rather than directs you, to get your best," Burton said.

Nichols's goal is to match the actor to the part. "If I can cast the right people and figure out the things they should be doing in the scene, they don't have to do anything but show up," Nichols says. "Nobody has to act." Over the years, Nichols has made some particularly daring, less than obvious choices—Art Garfunkel in "Carnal Knowledge," Adrian Lester in "Primary Colors," Hank Azaria in "The Birdcage"—but the outstanding example of inspired casting is Dustin Hoffman in "The Graduate," since Hoffman was both unknown and physically wrong for the preppy Benjamin Braddock, a Wasp college athlete who has an affair with one of his parents' friends. "There is no piece of casting in the twentieth century that I know of that is more courageous than putting me in that part," says Hoffman, who considers the film "the most perfect movie I've ever been part of," adding "I was a paralyzed person. I had come from a paralyzed background—the suffocation of that family. I was not acting."

What Nichols saw in Hoffman—"a dark, Jewish, anomalous presence"—was, of course, himself. Through improvisation, Nichols had learned to "treat yourself as a metaphor"; Hoffman gave him the same opportunity in film. "If the metaphor is powerful, it's always underneath you and you're always surfing it. You're always serving it," says Nichols. Even Hoffman's whimper, Nichols says, "was my little whimper when Jack Warner would tell a joke—in fact, people had to tell me to try not to whimper when he told jokes, that he would notice." Hoffman remembers Nichols taking him aside when he was listless in front of the cameras, a couple of months into the shooting, and saying, "This is the only time you'll ever get a chance to do this scene. It's going to be up there for the rest of your life." Hoffman adds, "He really meant it. It makes me cry, because he had that kind of passion, and it had that importance. I've never forgotten it. Mike worked like a surgeon every second."

Steven Spielberg calls "The Graduate" "a visual watershed," and invokes the moment when Benjamin races home ahead of Mrs. Robinson to tell her daughter Elaine, whom he loves, about his affair with her mother. "All of a sudden, the mother appears in the door behind Elaine, Elaine turns, and the focus racks to the mom. But when Elaine turns back the focus stays—Elaine is actually out of focus—and very slowly comes back until she is sharp and she realizes that Benjamin and her mother have been shtupping. I had never seen long lenses used that way to illuminate a character moment."



In Spielberg's encyclopedic appreciation of Nichols's cinematic innovations, he lists the handheld camera in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," which "further complicated" the anxiety and turned the couple's war into "a dance"; the "brilliant use of light" in "Day of the Dolphin," when the aquarium lights are turned on and a dead body is discovered floating inside the tank; the way Nichols built, bit by bit, the paranoia and terror in "Silkwood," which was, for Spielberg, "one of the most frightening and suspenseful things I had ever seen in a movie"; the long opening shot in "Carnal Knowledge," at the college party, and the way he "made love to Ann-Margret through the lighting." That controversial film, which Nichols considers his darkest, was a coruscating look at predatory sexual chauvinism and at women's suffering, themes that resonated with Nichols's own life at the time. "He was not nice to his girls," says a close friend of those middle years, when Nichols was married to his third wife, the Anglo-Irish novelist Annabel Davis-Goff, who is the mother of two of his children, Max and Jenny. (He had split up with Margot Callas in 1964.) "He was a terrible household tyrant."

"Carnal Knowledge" dramatized this tyranny. The night before Nichols was to shoot the crucial scene—the bedroom fracas between Jonathan (Jack Nicholson) and the depressed Bobbie (Ann-Margret), in which Jonathan goes berserk trying to force Bobbie out of his house and calls her "a ball-busting, castrating, son-of-a-cunt bitch!"—Feiffer sat with Nichols as Nichols explained why the scene had to go. "It's just so ugly, it's so awful, people are gonna hate it, and they're gonna hate the movie," Feiffer remembers him saying. "We went for a bite," Feiffer adds. "I just sat in the car listening to him go over and over why he couldn't shoot it. Finally, he just looked at me and said, 'No, we've got to do it, because it's true.' "

But after the box-office failures of both "Carnal Knowledge" and the ambitious but misguided "Catch-22"—a story whose surreality was not Nichols's strong suit—Nichols began, by his own admission, to lose his way. Once, during this period, he sat idling in his Rolls-

Royce at a Beverly Hills traffic light when a pimp in a flashy car pulled up beside him. "That's a Silver Cloud," the pimp said. "And you, man, are the silver lining." And so it had seemed, until, after his third miscue, with "Bogart Slept Here," it wasn't. Nichols told the world that he'd lost his appetite for making movies, but what he'd lost was a vital sense of connection to what he was doing and what he wanted to say. "Usually it happens right away, when I'm reading a script—I see a moment, and I know what that moment is, and it's my hook into the whole thing," Nichols says. In the years between closing down "Bogart Slept Here," in 1975, and starting "Silkwood," in 1983, those moments of compelling inspiration eluded him. In the interim, besides developing a film version of "A Chorus Line" (which he subsequently abandoned), he produced the musical "Annie" and the one-woman Broadway show that launched Whoopi Goldberg's career.

Then, sometime in the middle of the eighties, visions of an altogether different kind appeared to Nichols: for about six months, he experienced a Halcion-induced psychotic breakdown. He became delusional—he was convinced, for example, that he had lost all his money, and that he'd turned from being "the hero of the story" into the villain. "Because I'd lost the money, I was the bad guy. I'd brought shame and unhappiness to my family," he says. "It was a horrible feeling of abject despair and self-loathing." He was wide-eyed and gaunt. Nothing seemed to help. He called Buck Henry to ask if he'd give him enough sleeping pills to end his life if it was absolutely necessary. "Of course, I said I would," Henry says. "I was lying." At one low point, Nichols sat with the producer John Calley, now the head of Sony Pictures, and tallied up his assets item by item on a foolscap pad. Calley says, "I'd add the numbers up and at the bottom it would have thirteen million six, and I'd say, 'Do you see thirteen six?' He'd say, 'Yes.' I'd say, 'Now, can you accept that?' He'd say, 'The only thing I could accept would be you telling me that when I go into debtors' prison you will take care of the children.' " (Max was then eleven and Jenny was nine.) By the time Halcion was identified as the chemical source of his problem and Nichols stopped taking it, he had learned, he says, "what people are like when you're not so shiny and you don't have your powers." (His marriage to Davis-Goff broke up shortly thereafter.)

PEOPLE IN THE MIRROR MAY BE MORE ATTRACTIVE THAN THEY APPEAR
Victoria Roberts

His collapse proved cautionary, and his subsequent movies, from Neil Simon's "Biloxi Blues" and "Working Girl" to "Primary Colors" and "The Birdcage," were an aggressive reassertion of his commercial shine. With the exception of "Primary Colors," a subtle dissection of power and marriage, the films are crowd-pleasing fables. Nichols's impulse was clearly to build himself as solidly as possible into the Hollywood system. "Every development executive, every studio president, has a list of directors," Spielberg says, "and Mike has never been off the A-list." This puts Nichols's survival at the top of the Hollywood tree at thirty-four years and counting—longer than such legends as Preston Sturges, Billy Wilder, John Huston, and Frank Capra. Spielberg adds, "You want him because you know that he's going to tell the story better than it was told in the screenplay you bought. You're going to be getting basically two scripts for the price of one." Nichols knows the value of stories like "The Remains of the Day," "All the Pretty Horses," and "The Reader"; they are works he has produced, or will produce, but wasn't interested in directing. He loved the intellectual showboating of Stoppard's "Arcadia," a play about chaos theory, and wanted to make it into a film, but he couldn't make the numbers work.

"You don't want to take advantage of your friends and say, 'Would you mind doing this at a quarter of your price?' " he says.

"If movies hadn't changed so radically, what Mike would have been, perhaps should have been," Jules Feiffer says, "is the successor to a director like George Cukor—working in romantic comedy with urbane wit and style. But those times passed. So he had to shuffle around to find something to replace that." In choosing his projects, Nichols needs to feel, he says, that "only I can do this." When he picked "What Planet Are You From?," he thought, Yes, this is for me. I know what to do with it. Nichols's next film, starring Robin Williams and with a script by Elaine May, will be a remake of the classic Ealing comedy "Kind Hearts and Coronets." "I can only follow my excitement," Nichols says. "Sometimes I wish it were more high-minded, and sometimes I'm glad that it's not. I have no choice either way. I don't think 'The Graduate' and 'Carnal Knowledge' were any different from what I'm doing now." But the fact remains that the early pictures said new things in an ironic, challenging way, and the later work ruffles no feathers.

In any case, Nichols's asking price for mainstream movies has gone up: he now gets about seven and a half million dollars just for taking on a film, plus approximately twelve per cent of the gross. "So it's hard for him to say no," John Calley says. Some of his friends wish he would. "He knows I don't like a lot of the stuff he does. I think it's beneath him," Buck Henry says. "He should be doing more 'Hurlyburly's.'" But Nichols, who has heard the arguments, is unmoved. "All movies are pure process," he says. "A commercial movie isn't less process than an art movie. You can't make your decisions about a film on the basis of 'Is it important enough? Is it serious enough?' It's either alive or it's not for me. If it's alive, I want to do it." He adds, "If you're funny, and you stay funny, I think that's already doing pretty good."

In the pale-gray calm of his midtown editing suite, Nichols sits behind his editor, Richie Marks, who works away at an Avid console, tweaking the finale of "What Planet Are You From?" on a triptych of screens. Bening and Shandling—the earthling and the reconstructed alien—stand facing each other to reaffirm their marital vows. Bening is saying, "Harold, meeting you has taught me the universe is one big screwed-up place where everyone's just trying to work out their problems, but I'm honored to work them out with you, because . . . I think . . . I love you." When the lights come on, Nichols says, "I have this experience over and over. I make a movie because it draws me, and when I get it all finished I think, Christ, look, it's about me." The alien, who comes to earth merely to exploit women, has been humanized by love—and he becomes, as Nichols points out, "simultaneously the leader of his planet." In Nichols's eyes, his marriage to Diane Sawyer has wrought the same miracle. "True love made Pinocchio a real boy," Nichols said in a TV interview. "We all sort of feel like we're contraptions, like we pasted ourselves together—a little bit from here, a little bit from there—and then, if you're very lucky, along comes someone who loves you the right way, and then you're real."

"Mike spent many years without happiness. I mean, there were dark years where it wasn't quite working in relationships," Calley says. "He was in them but they weren't giving him a lot of joy. With Diane, he doesn't have to pretend not to be who he is to make a partner comfortable." Intimacy requires equality; and Sawyer, who has her own constituency, checkbook, and clout, is in every way an equal to Nichols, whom she first met while waiting to board a Concorde flight from Paris. Even today, if asked to shut her eyes and picture him, Sawyer sees Nichols as she did that first day: "All that light in his eyes and some sort of invitation. He's just full of invitation. It's like, 'Let's be young together. Let's see things for the first time and tell each other the absolute truth, want to?' " After their chance meeting, Sawyer approached Nichols for a TV interview: "I just had this idea of wild intelligence and that there'd be some surprise there," she says. The surprise was, she says, "that there was no end to the surprises."

Nichols and Sawyer live on the seventh floor of a handsome Fifth Avenue apartment building with a view of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from their library. Most of Nichols's art collection was sold off at bargain-basement prices in his Halcion panic; at one point he owned six paintings by Balthus, including the infamous "The Guitar Lesson," which hung over his bed. ("I had to get rid of it," he says. "It pissed off too many women.") But there is still a Stubbs, a Fischl, and a beautiful Morandi study of bottles whose hard-won peace echoes the current mood of its owner. He is on record as saying that the best definition of happiness appears in Tom Stoppard's "The Real Thing." "Happiness is equilibrium," the main character says. "Shift your weight." "It's good, and it's true," Nichols continues Stoppard's thought. "You have to stay light on your feet and remember what's important and what's not." These days, Nichols teaches; he attends meetings of Friends In Deed, an outreach charity for people with AIDS and other life-threatening diseases, which he founded with the actress Cynthia O'Neal; and he keeps up a proliferating E-mail correspondence. He visits his horses, and he even cooks now: his specialties include lemon pasta, risotto with smoked mozzarella, and sour-cream-peach ice cream. Sawyer leaves notes on the floor beside their bed when she slips off to the network every day at 4 A.M. to anchor "Good Morning America"; before going back to sleep, according to Sawyer, Nichols "opens one eye and says, 'Tell it like it is.' "

On the chaise longue in the bedroom is an embroidered pillow with words that play on a line from one of Nichols's favorite movies, "Lawrence of Arabia," in which an Arab tells Lawrence to abandon a straggler in his party. "It is written," the Arab says. The cushion gives Lawrence's answer: "Nothing Is Written." It seems an apt motto for Nichols's journey. Nichols, who keeps no diaries and few mementos of his extraordinary life, is still all future. "He can go on and on until he chooses not to go on anymore," Spielberg says of Nichols's moviemaking career. But the greatest of Nichols's mise en scènes is himself: he has created a person who lives well in the world.

At the end of our time together, he sat back on the sofa and declared himself pleased with the conversation. "I do well with the fundamentally inconsolable," I said. The words seemed to surprise Nichols and to press him back in his seat. His eyes fluttered shut for a moment, then opened. "We get a lot done, you know," he said. ♦

FROM THE NOTEBOOKS OF ELIZABETH BISHOP

FAR INLAND

These unfinished poems were discovered among the author's papers at the Vassar College library.

FLORIDA DESERTA

Oh summer clouds that come so low, come down,
down the streets of the tourist-deserted town,
    shade the houses,
    soothe the eyes,
come down so every head can wear
    a cold compress,
descend, surround, and dissipate the glare,
banish the break-bone fever.

And summer stars, refrangible though aloof,
converge invisibly on each tin roof:
    each shiny scale
    of that whole shoal
of sleeping tarpon; meet within,
    be colorful,
restore to every sun-bleached, spectral brain
its coldest blue and green.

THE STREET BY THE CEMETERY

The people on little verandahs in the moonlight
    are looking at the graveyard
    like passengers on shipboard.
How did it happen on this warm and brilliant night
    that steerage passengers
    were given deck chairs?

They are admiring the long row of white oleanders
    inside the graveyard paling.
    The moon goes sailing,
and hypnotized they sit on the verandahs
    with nothing much to say
    to the neighbors three feet away.

The gravestones do not move; but in the blended motions
    of the oleander
    its white blossoms stir
like pieces of paper in those dark accumulations
    floating in a cluster
    in the dirty harbor.

VAGUE POEM

The trip west
—I think I *dreamed* that trip.
They talked a lot of "rose rocks"
or maybe "rock roses"
—I'm not sure now, but someone tried to get me some.
(And two or three students had.)

She said she had some at her house.
They were by the back door, she said.
—A ramshackle house.
An Army house? No, "a *Navy* house." Yes,
that far inland.
There was nothing by the back door but dirt
or that same dry, monochrome, sepia straw I'd seen everywhere.
Oh, she said, the dog has carried them off.
(A big black dog, female, was dancing around us.)

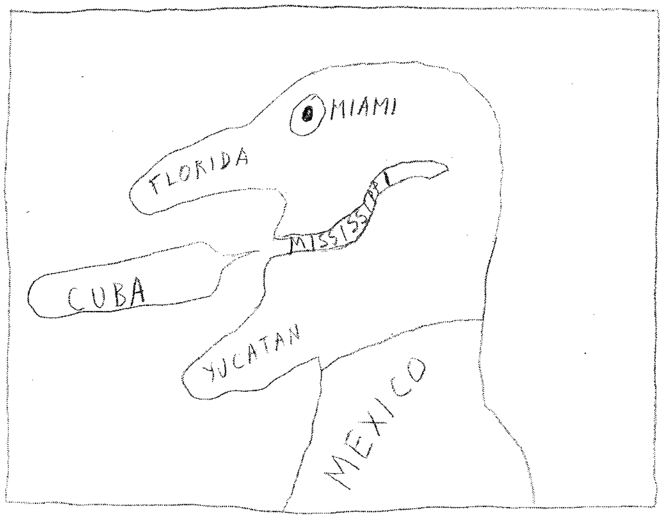
Later, as we drank tea from mugs, she found one,
"a sort of one." "This one is just beginning. See—
you can see here, it's beginning to look like a rose.
It's—well, a crystal, crystals form—
I don't know any geology myself . . ."
(Neither did I.)
Faintly, I could make out—perhaps—in the dull,
rose-red lump of (apparently) soil
a rose-like shape; faint glitters . . . Yes, perhaps
there was a secret, powerful crystal at work inside.

I *almost* saw it: turning into a rose
without any of the intervening
roots, stem, buds, and so on; just
earth to rose and back again.
Crystallography and its laws:
something I once wanted badly to study,
until I learned that it would involve a lot of arithmetic,
    that is, mathematics.

Just now, when I saw you naked again,
I thought the same words: rose-rock, rock-rose . . .
Rose, trying, working, to show itself,
forming, folding over,
unimaginable connections, unseen, shining edges.
Rose-rock, unformed, flesh beginning, crystal by crystal,
clear pink breasts and darker, crystalline nipples,
rose-rock, rose-quartz, roses, roses, roses,
exacting roses from the body,
and the even darker, accurate, rose of sex—

PORTFOLIO BY SAUL STEINBERG

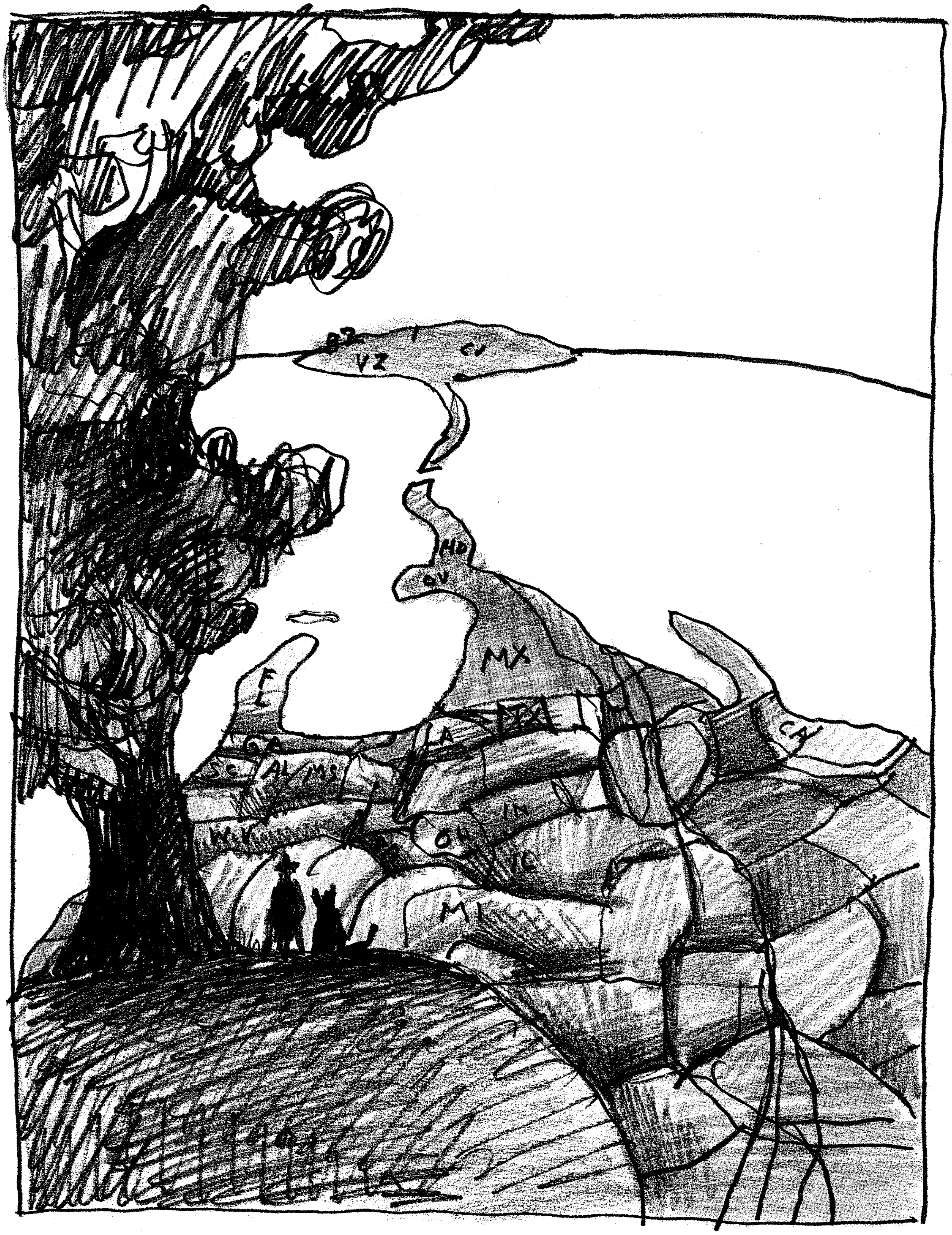
MAPS



The mapmakers' section of the Paradiso, where the irreplaceable Saul Steinberg now resides, is divided into two zones: the longitudinarians' and the latitudinarians'. The longitudinarians have been getting the cream of publicity lately, but don't go looking for Steinberg in the company of Claudius Ptolemy, where the space allotments are tightly plotted and no one bumps into anything sharp. You'll find him, rather, in the room of the medieval makers of *mappae mundi* (that is, "cloths of the world"), like Isidore of Seville and Richard of Holdingham, for whom coördinates were generally spiritual and cultural rather than mathematical. When medieval latitudinarians answered the question "Where, for Christ's sake, *am* I?" they began with an image of the Saviour and took the obligations of orientation literally, so that the east was always at the top of the map, with Jerusalem at its center.

The *mappae mundi* men were less interested in seeing the world as measured space than as an itinerary, so that distance or proximity would be given its proper scale depending on its importance to the traveller. Their job was to give some idea of the marvels to be encountered along the way. Pictured in deepest Asia, for example, were Essedones, who, rather than have worms devour their recently deceased parents, considerately gobbled them up themselves; a little farther to the north and east were the *avalerion*, birds who hatched their eggs once every sixty years and then drowned themselves. The medieval maps were colored (again, literally) by historical and Biblical stereotypes. The Red Sea, in Abraham Cresques' great fourteenth-century Catalan atlas is (what else?) bright scarlet and is divided by a strip of dry land, thanks to Moses' special arrangement with the great Cartographer. Likewise, Steinberg's American hemisphere, seen from the north, is colored by cultural stereotypes shading from a cool Yankee blue down through the cornpone sunshiny yellow of Texas and Florida to the hot candy reds of Mexico. These visual puns are often wickedly witty: a cigar-shaped Cuba in a Punch face, inviting a pull from the mouth of the Mississippi, the states of the union indicated as states of mind, with the Pacific Northwest bottled up tightly in its "perplexity" and the Midwest fatalistically amorphous. But these maps also have a pessimistically sardonic edge to them, an impatience with a culture that compresses continental and intercontinental distances into so many Heres and Theres divided only by delays at LaGuardia—a world in which the ancient Aristotelian divisions of frigid, torrid, and temperate have been replaced by the beverage, movie, and snooze zones. Even Steinberg's one fixed point of reference in the universe—Manhattan—ceases to be the famous, gentle joke about cultural egotism and becomes instead something close to a valedictory caution. For in his "Middle East," Washington Heights has morphed into the Golan, Wall Street brokers go about their business eyeless in Gaza, and the insular Promised Land nervously interposes itself between a remote U.S.A. off to the west and an Arabia uncomfortably close to the east. The image has the quality of satellite views of the planet, at once touching and worrying, a map of the modern Jerusalem. A nice place to visit. But would you really want to live there?

—*Simon Schama*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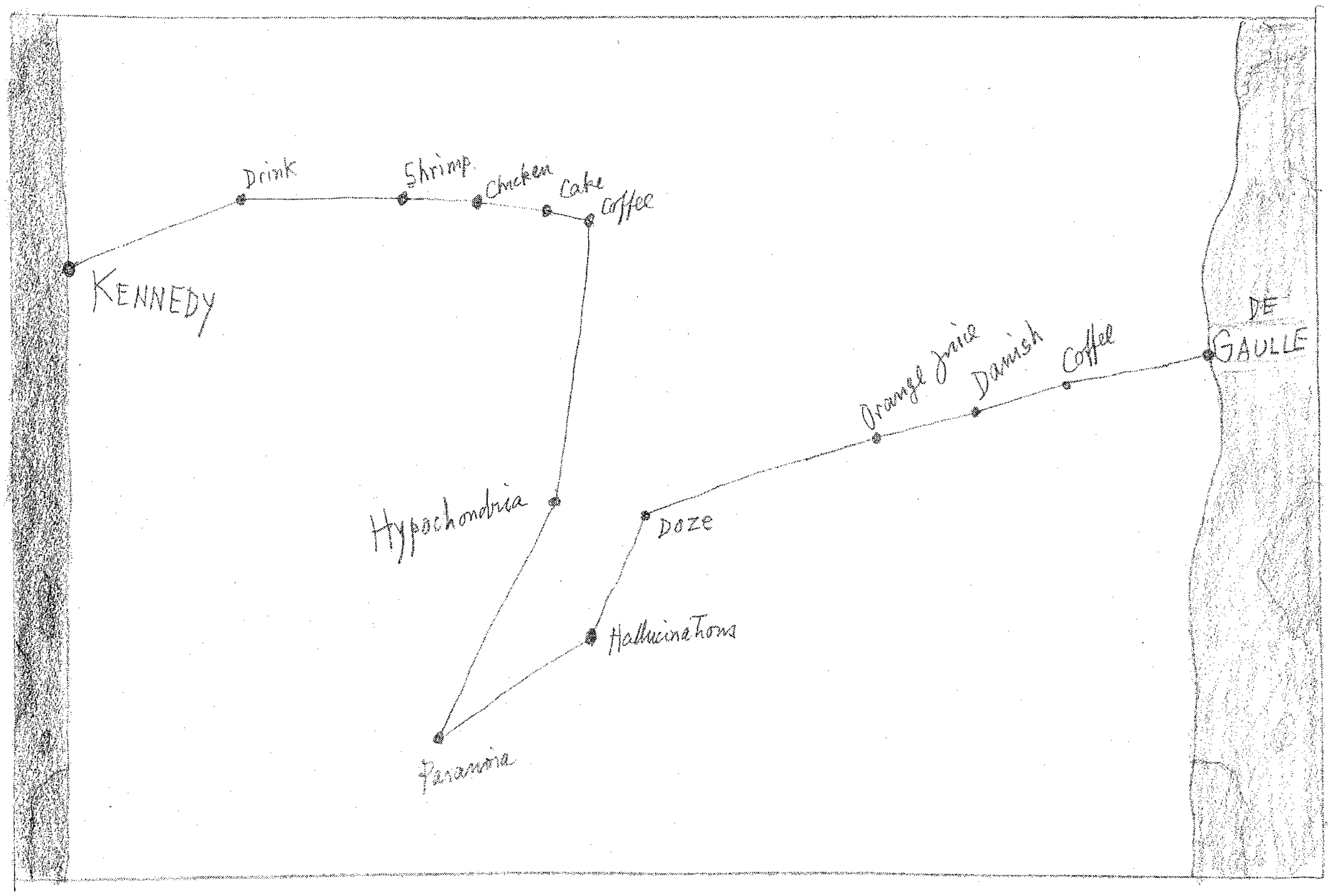
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Danish
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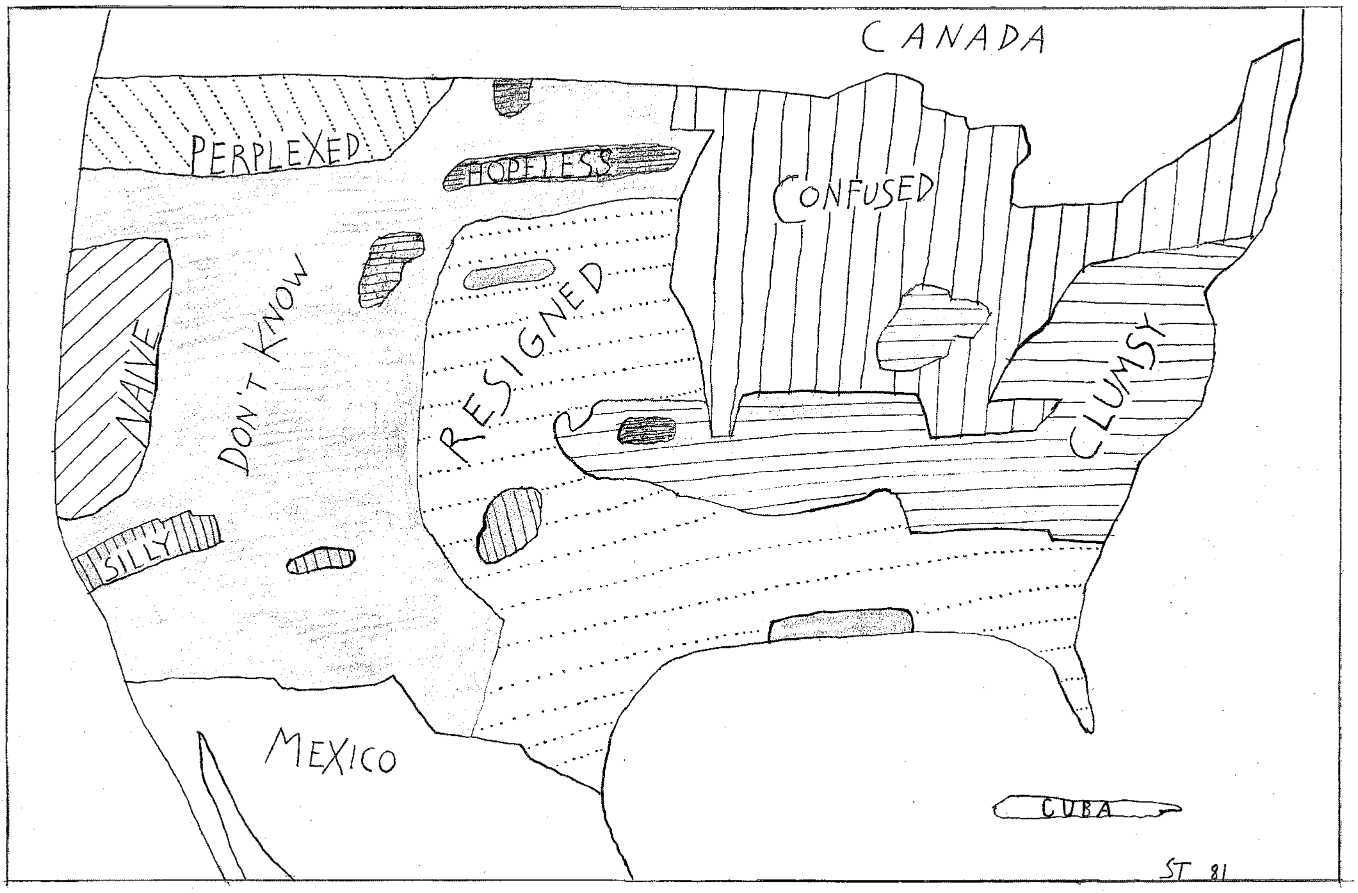
Doze
Hallucinations
Paranoia

Flight Map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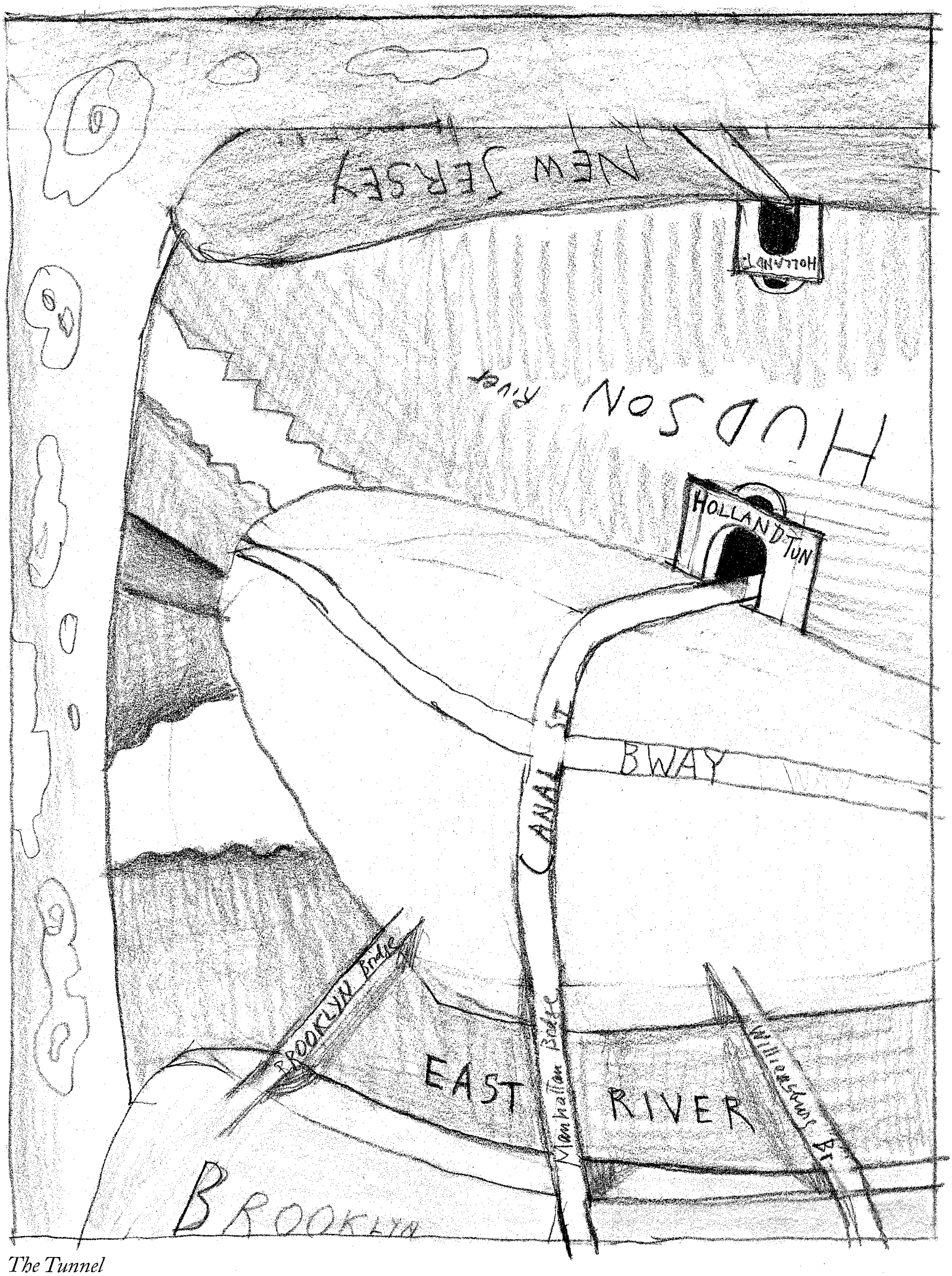
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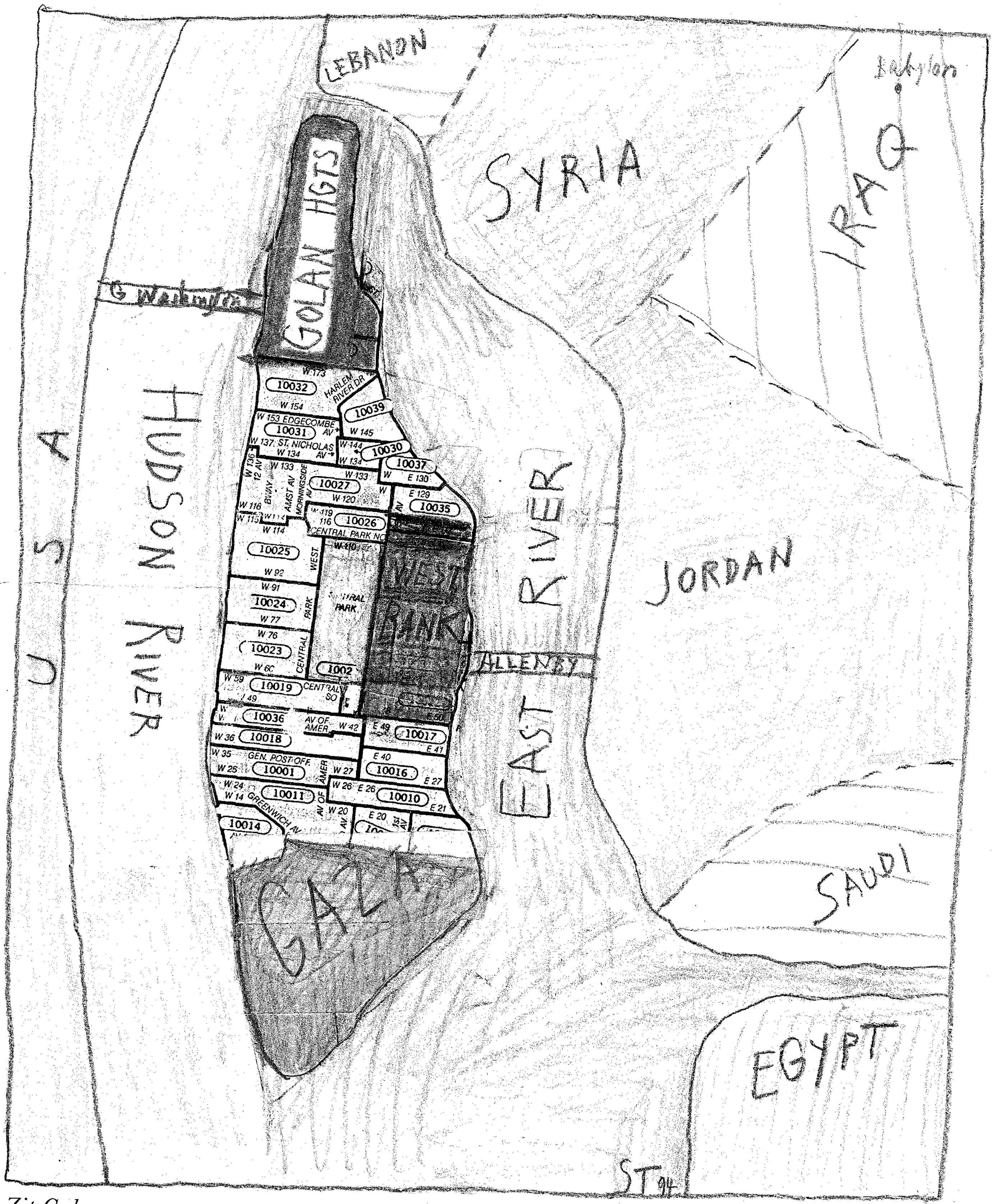
BWAY
BROOKLYN Bridge
EAST RIVER
Manhattan Bridge
Williamsburg Br.
BROOKLYN

The Tunnel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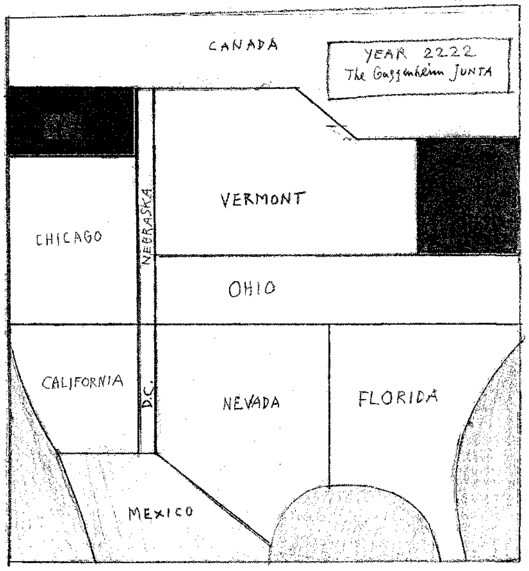
Zip Codes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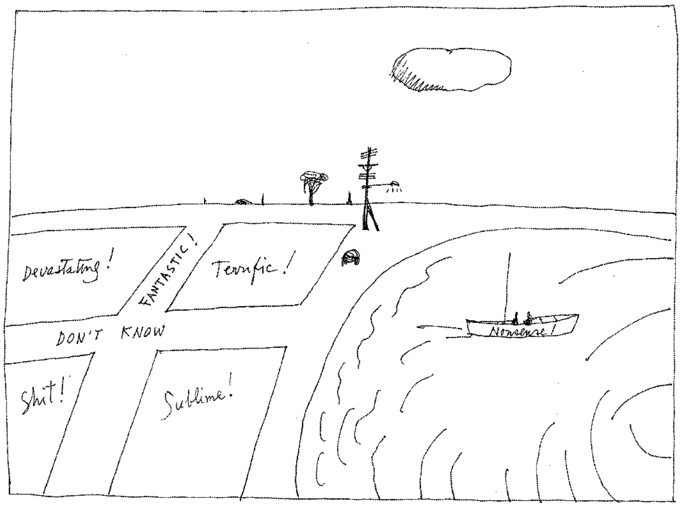
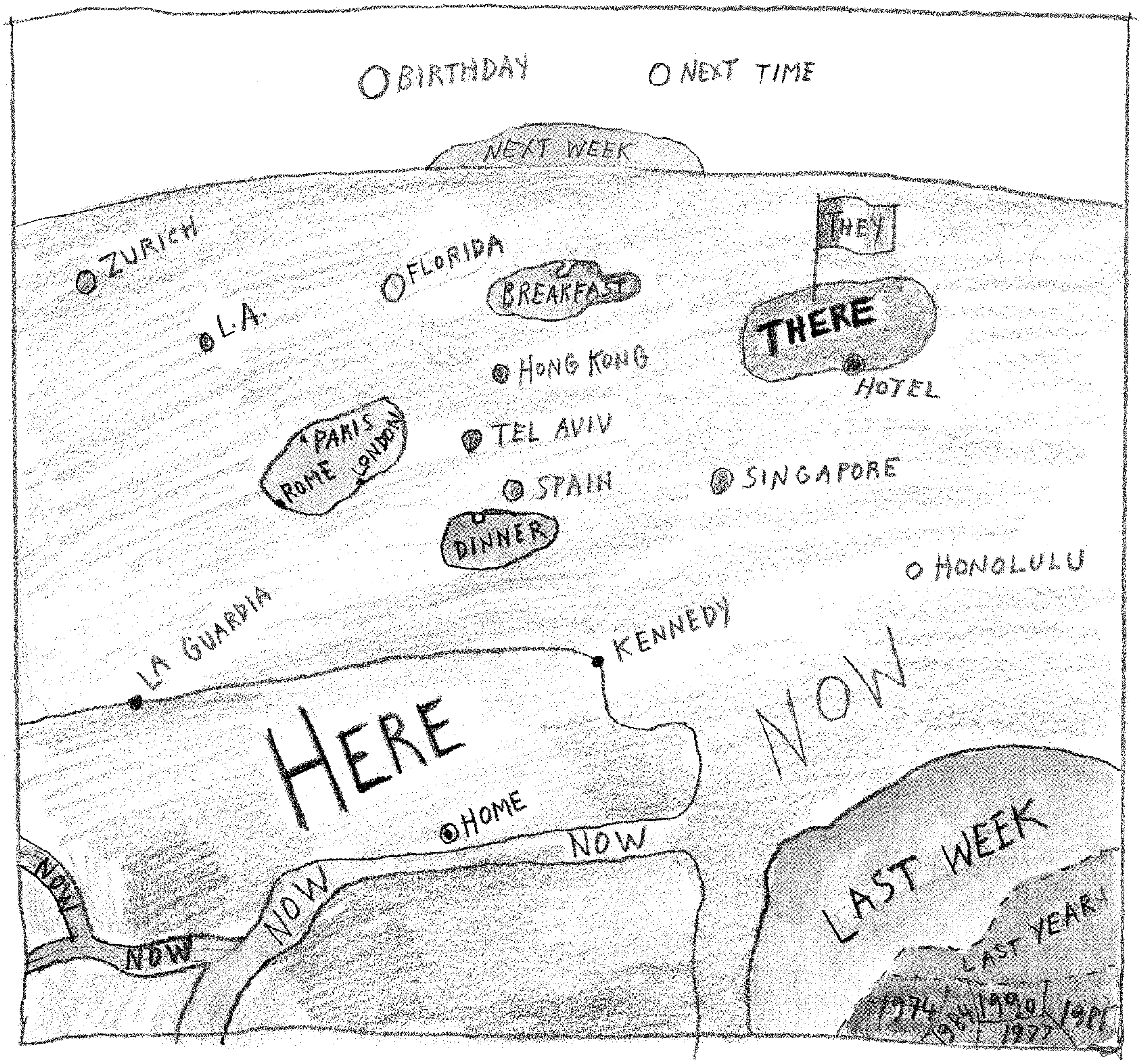
MEXICO

Law and Order—Museum Dictatorship


Devastating!
FANTASTIC!
Terrific!
DON'T KNOW
Shit!
Sublime!
Nonsense!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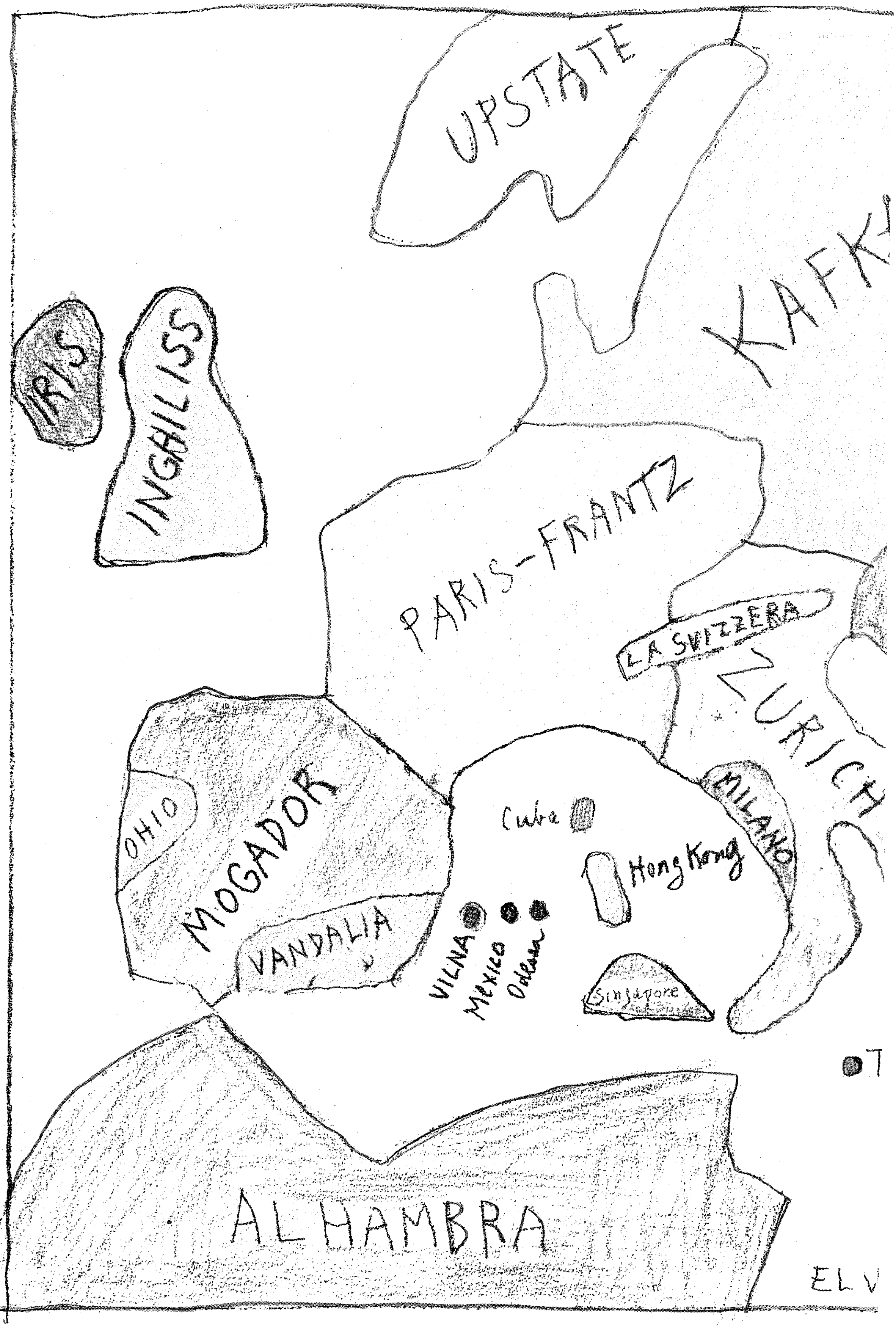
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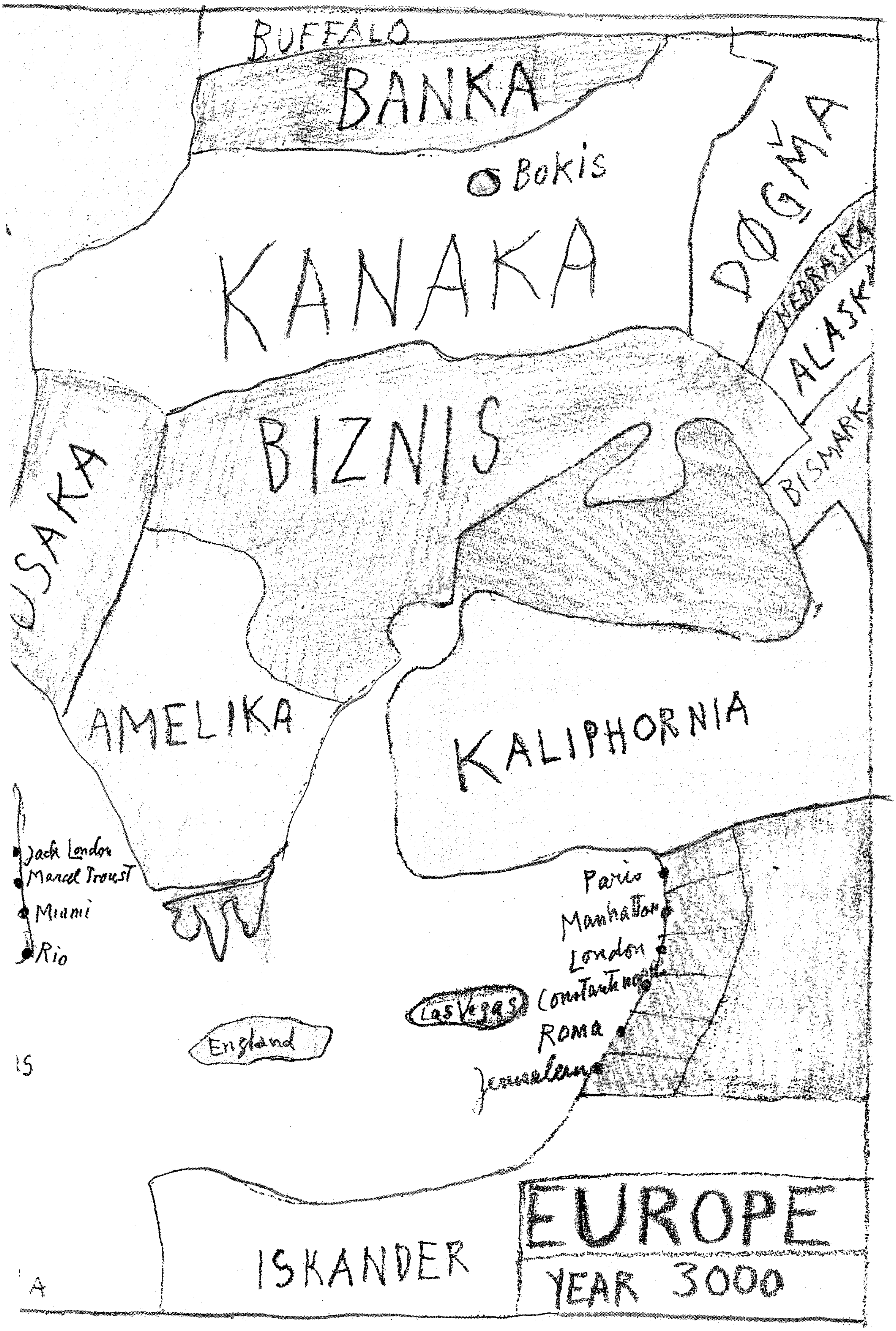
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LETTER FROM HAVANA

THE OLD MAN AND THE BOY

Fidel Castro was keeping his socialist state together by sheer force of will. Then young Elián González washed ashore.

BY JON LEE ANDERSON

One day toward the end of January, Fidel Castro sat quietly in an auditorium in Havana for the better part of the afternoon, listening to speeches by perhaps a dozen economists who had been invited to Cuba for a conference on "Globalization and Development Problems." Fidel was dressed in the kind of olive-green-fatigue outfit he has worn for the last forty years. Most of the economists were wearing suits or *guayabera* shirts, and their speeches all came to much the same conclusion: the new global market economy is unfair to developing nations. Finally, Fidel raised his hand and asked, quietly, with theatrical meekness, if he could say something about Cuba's situation. The audience tittered and chuckled at his self-mocking humility, and everyone settled into a respectful silence as he began to speak, moving elliptically from one anecdote to another and then back again, making the argument that Cuba, despite the long economic blockade imposed against it by the United States, had not only endured but had safeguarded its independence through unswerving dedication to its revolutionary principles and the fortitude, self-reliance, and inventiveness of its citizens. "The revolution," he proclaimed, "has made us powerful."

Having said that, he added, wryly, that he could not "recommend" Cuba's experience as a model for other nations. Things had been tough during the so-called Special Period in Time of Peace—his label for Cuba's rock-bottom economic emergency in the early and mid-nineties, following the demise of its principal patron, the Soviet Union. But the country had pulled through and had overcome every obstacle thrown in its way. "We have revalued our currency seven times, and we are winning the battle of the Special Period!" Fidel exclaimed. "We haven't closed a single school, and we've added thirty thousand new doctors in the Special Period alone, and tens of thousands of teachers! How could we do this? Because we don't belong to the International Monetary Fund!" The economists burst into applause at this point, and one of them, a Mexican, gave a raucous, yipping cry that hung briefly above the loud clapping. The I.M.F., Fidel went on darkly, was nothing less than "the backbone of the New World Order of Globalization . . . the gendarme and the executioner who places the guillotine over the heads of all of us in the Third World."

Fidel's reedy voice had crept up steadily in pitch, and his long, thin, pale hands, which are mottled with age spots, rose in the air and then fell to the table in front of him, which he frequently slapped for emphasis. He rounded off his lecture with a litany of Cuba's cultural and educational accomplishments, predicting that the country's primary-school children would attain "university levels" of comprehension in "general culture and politics" within ten years' time. As evidence, he cited the children who had made improvisational appearances during the recent protests against the "kidnapping" of young Elián González by the Cuban "mafia" in Miami. "Child orators have appeared who are capable of giving speeches without notes!" he exclaimed. Then, having veered into the subject of the battle over Elián, he elaborated with gusto: "Never in the history of the revolution has there been such a mobilization of the masses and of resources as in this case. And the battle is not over! We have reserves to keep on going for another ten years!"

Fidel was in especially good form that day. His wispy beard and thinning hair, which are now steel-gray, were carefully combed, and although he looked tired, and had double bags under his eyes, he was in full command. Best of all, he kept his discourse to just over an hour. He had been buoyed, no doubt, by the public-relations success of Elián's two grandmothers, who were approaching the end of their nine-day trip to the United States. Polls showed that a majority of Americans sympathized with them. The Elián controversy seemed to be turning people against the anti-Castro exile community, whose case for keeping the boy away from his father was looking more and more perverse.

Fidel has been obsessed with the Elián González tragicomedy from the beginning. It is as if he were a general overseeing a great battle, moving his troops into position, plotting tactics and strategy, organizing skirmishes, and conducting psychological warfare to undermine the enemy. Two days after his meeting with the economists, he appeared in the same auditorium at a homecoming ceremony for *las abuelas*, the grandmothers. The *abuelas* and Elián's father, Juan Manuel González, arrived from the airport in a black Mercedes sports coupe, followed by an identical Mercedes full of men who looked as if they were part of a security detail. Other vehicles in the convoy, including vintage American Chevys, carried more of Elián's relatives. Crowds of cheering and flag-waving Cubans had lined the roadsides into town and the route the *abuelas* took down the Malecón, Havana's waterfront boulevard, past the stone-and-blue-glass façade of the United States Interests Section, which houses the offices of the small American-government contingent in Cuba. The two women were fêted by hundreds of Young Pioneers who sang and chanted patriotic slogans in their, and Elián's, honor. In the front row of the audience below the dais, Fidel, looking for all the world like a happy grandfather, sat beaming.

A few days later, a close friend of Fidel's told me that he had been to his office twice in the past week to see him but had not been able to get a word in edgewise. Both times, all Fidel did was talk about Elián and the *abuelas*. He is *abuélico*, the friend said, employing a neologism that means, more or less, "*abuela*-addicted." He raised his eyebrows in exaggerated frustration. "This is *it* for him; he's not dealing with anything else." He said that Fidel had crowed gleefully, "Eisenhower had to deploy five million men and tanks and airplanes to take Europe, but *I've* managed to destabilize the government of the United States with just two grannies!" This was a rather idiosyncratic analysis of the situation, but one could see Fidel's point. He was making the U.S. squirm, one more time.

Fidel has been distressed about Cubans' alienation from the revolution and angry about the political clout of the Miami exiles.

SVEN CREUTZMANN/ZEITENSPIEGEL

Fidel, as he is known by everyone in Cuba except his enemies, who pointedly—but rarely loudly enough to be heard—call him "Castro," has been Cuba's Jefe Máximo since 1959, which makes him the longest-lasting head of state in the world. He will soon have seen eight Presidents of the United States come and go, not to mention the Soviet empire. Fidel is seventy-three, and he is frequently referred to—affectionately—as El Viejo, the Old Man. He has aged badly, and although he still stands erect and has a proud carriage, he moves stiffly. His high brow, aquiline nose, and bushy black eyebrows—the hairs of which he often plays with when he is concentrating—give him an air of majesty, but he has begun to bear an uncanny resemblance to one of his heroes, Don Quixote. He has even acquired some odd mannerisms, including frequent grimaces and strange munching movements of his jaws.

In private, like impatient heirs waiting for a rich elderly uncle to die, Cubans regularly speculate about the signs they believe they see of Fidel's advancing age, terminal illness, or impending senility. When he doesn't appear in public for a while, as sometimes happens, there is never an official explanation for his absence, and the rumors, *la bola*, inevitably begin to circulate that he is dead. After one such report was made by a Miami television station in 1997, he gave a seven-hour live television interview, defying not only the accounts of his death but also the impression that he was unwell. He has repeated that performance several times since then, leading to speculation about how he manages to talk for so many hours without going to the bathroom.

A story that has been making the rounds in Havana for some time involves Fidel receiving a Galápagos turtle as a gift. When he inquires how long it will live, he is told that the turtles usually last four hundred years. "That's the problem with pets," he says, handing it back. "You get attached to them and then they die on you." Many Cubans believe that Fidel is the beneficiary of some kind of life-sustaining miracle drug, or that, years ago, he was granted special longevity by Yoruba priests. A Cuban doctor told me she has it on good authority that Fidel undergoes regular sessions in a hyperbaric chamber, lying for hours inside a metal sheath—"just like a sarcophagus," she added with a giggle. More seriously, people within the Cuban nomenklatura have told me that he had an *esquemia*, a cerebral aneurysm, or a stroke, several years ago, and that he has problems with his blood circulation, for which he takes a daily cocktail of medicines. As for the incessant munching and teeth-baring expressions, he is said to have had dentures fitted that he has not yet grown accustomed to.

One evening over dinner in Havana, I asked a retired Cuban psychiatrist to give me a clinical assessment of Fidel. Lowering his voice and adopting a solemn tone, he told me that he had studied Fidel's personality over the years and had come to the conclusion that he is a psychopath. "He has a psychopathic syndrome that is characterized by a strong narcissism with paranoid tendencies, such as his fear of disloyalty and betrayal and so forth," the man explained. "He exhibits behavior that is abnormal, but which is moderated and made more acceptable by his lucidity and intelligence—and, above all, by his power. It is power that drives Fidel, and that's it. Everything in his life, including other people, is at the service of this power. He does not love anyone else, truly. How can he if he loves himself so?" Later in the evening, the psychiatrist revealed that he has literary ambitions, and had written an essay about "the pathology of dictators." The essay had never been published, of course, nor did he imagine that it ever would be.

The fact that most of what is known about Fidel remains at the level of speculation says a great deal about the way he exercises power and the way Cuban society has evolved during his long tenure. Very few Cubans know anything about his private life, including where he lives. When he moves around Havana, he does so in a fast-moving motorcade of black Mercedes-Benzes, and the traffic lights are synchronized to stop the traffic along his main route. His convoy and his security men suddenly come into view, and then they flash past. *La bola* has it that when Fidel leaves his home—which is said to be situated somewhere within a well-guarded enclave in Siboney, a leafy section of western Havana—he does so via a system of entries and exits that are concealed from public view. His office, in the virtually impenetrable Council of State building on the Plaza de la Revolución, is buried in the inner recesses of the edifice, invisible from the street; its windows look out on a private interior garden. The doors to his office (and those of the other high-ranking Central Committee members) are said to be electronically locked and sealed at night with a specially embossed wax.

Fidel's security fears are probably justified. Over the years, numerous attempts have been made to kill him. Only a few weeks ago, he told journalists, "There have been more than six hundred plots to assassinate me; it's a miracle I'm still here." In 1997, a group of Cuban-Americans were arrested by the U.S. Coast Guard after an inspection of their cabin cruiser turned up snipers' weapons. One of them confessed that they intended to kill Castro at that year's Ibero-American Summit, which was about to take place on Margarita Island, off the coast of Venezuela. This plot and a spate of hotel bombings in Havana the same year were later linked to the Cuban-American National Foundation (an anti-Castro group that has a high profile in the ongoing Elián drama in Miami) and to a fugitive Cuban-American former C.I.A. agent who gave interviews taking credit for the attacks.

The paranoia generated by such activities is exacerbated by a long history of attrition in Fidel's own ranks. Last year, for instance, one of his bodyguards defected to the U.S. during a state visit to the Dominican Republic. In 1993, his daughter, Alina, a former model who is now in her forties, fled the country. She lives in Spain, and has published a memoir in which she bitterly disparages her father as a coldhearted tyrant. Fidel loathes nothing so much as betrayal, and those who have left the island or gone public with what they know about him are referred to as *gusanos*, "worms." To keep on top of things, Fidel maintains an impressive state-security and counterintelligence apparatus that has in the past successfully infiltrated both Miami's Cuban-exile community and the C.I.A.'s espionage network. People who are found guilty of crimes against the state while they are in Cuba are usually locked away for years or shot by a firing squad. The handful of dissidents still living there are closely watched and periodically detained and interrogated.

Fidel's penchant for micromanaging everything—from agriculture to religion to sports—extends to security details. He is said to personally supervise the most important espionage operations and to carefully study the dossiers of special cases prepared by his security services. During a press conference in November, Fidel alluded to his internal-security network when he was asked whether or not corruption existed in Cuba. He replied that there had been some cases of such a thing, but that the problem was not as great as in other countries. "The Party is an organization that helps fight corruption," he explained. "But, even more important, we have a people who monitor their neighbors and who communicate what they see to the appropriate ministry. . . . Listen, we don't miss a thing here, not a thing!"

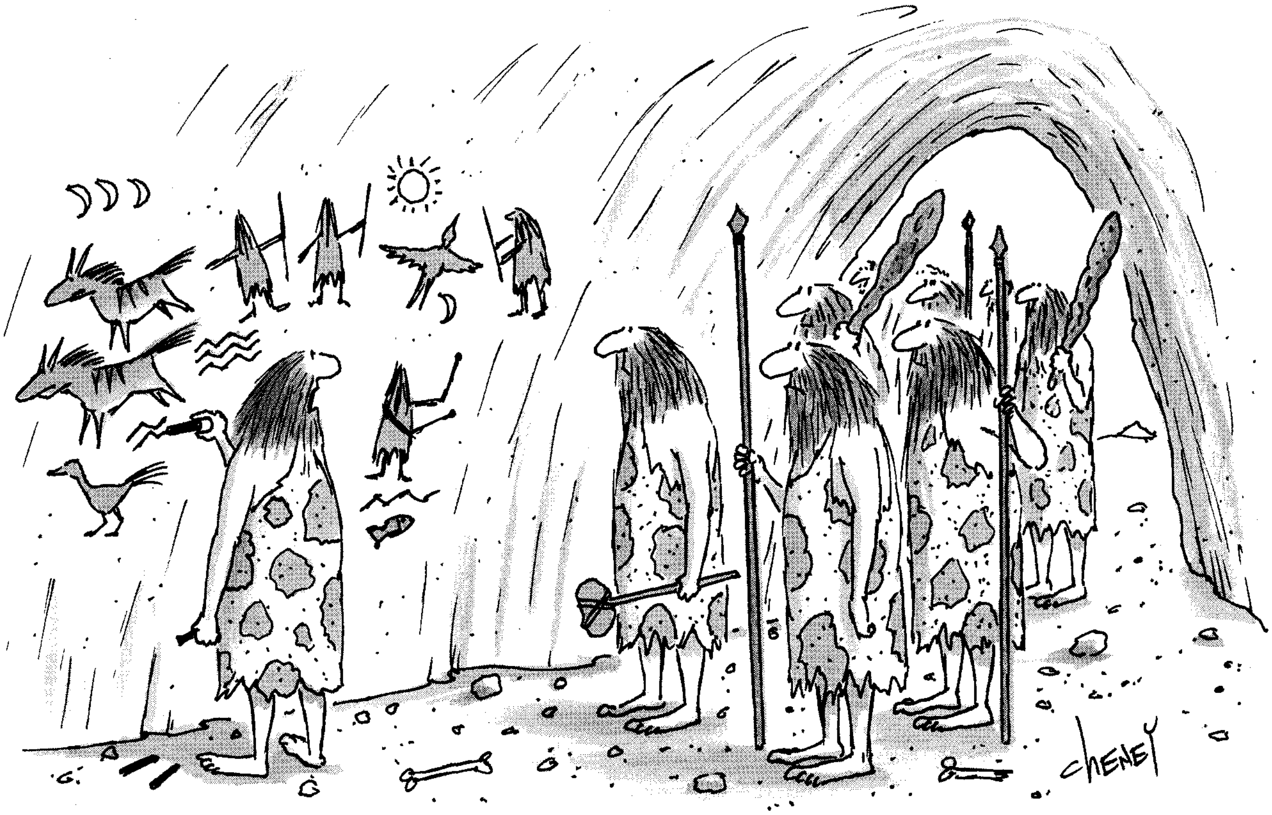
Early on in the revolution, Che Guevara observed that Fidel was a uniquely gifted "transmitter of the will" of the Cuban people. Fidel seemed to "vibrate with the masses" during his marathon public speeches, and over the years the claims for his *caudillismo* were adopted as dogma. Fidel is not merely Fidel; he is the conduit of the people, who speak through him. He remains Cuba's Jefe Máximo because that is what is desired by the people, in whom he has placed his destiny, like some kind of sacrificial offering on the altar of the common good. Fidel's power is so vast and so secure that it requires little physical symbolism. He is everywhere and nowhere at once. To my knowledge, there is not a single statue of him anywhere in Havana, and no streets or public buildings are named after him. Busts and monuments erected in honor of Cuba's other national and revolutionary heroes and martyrs—such as José Martí, Che Guevara, and Camilo Cienfuegos—abound, and Havana's avenues are prominently punctuated by the great bronze equestrian statues of nineteenth-century Cuban independence heroes. There are even two new city parks in Old Havana that have been named in honor of Mother Teresa and, incredibly, Princess Diana. A John Lennon park is supposed to be inaugurated sometime this year. Fidel's presence is marked only by Communist Youth wall graffiti repeating some of his more declamatory statements, and illustrated with graphics of his silhouette. A typical one, painted in bright colors across a hundred metres of wall near the Plaza de la Revolución, reads, "We Believe in Fidel, the Revolution, and Socialism."

Fidel's birthplace, in a fertile pocket of Cuba's eastern farming country, at the foot of a low range of forested hills called the Mayarí, is state property, but it hasn't been made into a shrine. The house where he was born is a no-nonsense wood-plank pile on stilts with deep porches and large doors and windows. It has a zinc roof and is painted a sort of burnt sienna, with white trim. The house is reminiscent of tropical plantation architecture elsewhere in the Caribbean—especially that of the homes built by the United Fruit Company, which owned most of the productive land in the vicinity in the early nineteen-hundreds—but it also bears the unmistakable touches of a Galician peasant's home. Underneath the stilts, a mosaic of large flat stones marks the spot where the dairy cows were milked before dawn, and from which the brimming churns were brought up a flight of simple wooden stairs directly into the kitchen.

The house is the centerpiece of a rambling farm compound near Birán, a hamlet that sits alone in a rough patchwork of green sugarcane and cattle-grazing lands. The estate was founded by Fidel's father, Ángel Castro, who arrived in Cuba from Galicia in the mid-eighteen-nineties as a young recruit in Spain's colonial army, and who stayed on and joined in the land grab for former Crown properties after the defeat of the Spanish in 1898. By the early nineteen-twenties, Ángel Castro had staked a claim to a fifty-acre plot of land in Birán. By the time of his death, in 1956, he owned two thousand acres of land and held the leases to another twenty-three thousand. He was rich enough to send his son Fidel to an exclusive private high school, the Jesuit-run Colegio Belén in Havana, and then on to study law at Havana University.

Although the Birán estate is closed to the general public, I was shown around on a warm, breezy day late last month by its official historian, Antonio López, who has been involved in a limited restoration of the property. He took me to a small glade of trees near a schoolhouse, where the tombs of Fidel's parents are looked over by a white marble angel. Castro *père* was married twice, first to a Cuban schoolteacher, who bore him two children (both of whom are now dead), and then to Lina Ruz, the family's cook and maid, a slim, dark-haired woman who was thirty-two years younger than he was. They had seven children, three of whom, including Fidel, were born before Ángel's first wife died. Fidel's look-alike older brother, Ramón, now runs an experimental farm near Havana and has never become involved in politics. His younger brother, Raúl, is his deputy in the Communist Party, the chief of Cuba's armed forces, and his anointed successor. They have four sisters: Emma, who married an engineer and now lives in Mexico; Ángela and Augustina, who live quietly as housewives in Havana; and Juana, a pharmacist, who fell out with Fidel and Raúl and lives in self-imposed exile in Miami.

During a quick visit to see his mother at Birán in December, 1958, only a few days before the victory of his rebel forces over Fulgencio Batista, Fidel impetuously ordered the expropriation of the estate "by the people." In Cuba's historical canon, his action is cited as one of



"I don't know how to draw a merger—you'll have to go back and kill them."

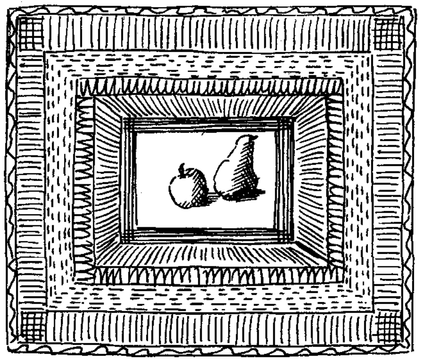
the first radical agrarian-reform measures in Cuba, an example of his selfless dedication to the cause of social equality. His mother saw things differently. After Fidel's surprise announcement, which caused a frenzied free-for-all for possessions among his peasant followers, she took out her Winchester rifle and threatened to shoot him then and there. Raúl, her favorite son, interceded and managed to calm her down and defuse the situation, and the brothers decided to let things remain as they were. Their mother refused to leave the estate; she lived there until she died, in 1963.

At the end of my tour, López declared his wish to pay "homage" to Fidel Castro. "Fidel was a child like any other," he said, "running around, riding horses, and throwing rocks. But he was also different. If Fidel saw a boy without shoes, he would take his own off and give them to the other boy. Several times, he returned to the house naked because he had given everything away. He was different because he was able to compare what his family had with what others didn't have." I asked López whether he had received much assistance from the Castros in his efforts to restore their home. "No, the family hasn't coöperated much with the restoration," he said, looking a little frustrated. When I asked him why that was so, López replied somewhat circumspectly that it had to do with their wanting to avoid giving the wrong impression. "You know, that problem of the . . . cult of personality."

Fidel's insistence on keeping the details of his personal life in the background, and on promoting a larger-than-life persona, has created a syndrome of collective self-censorship that can be a paralyzing problem, even for some of his staunchest loyalists. When an American filmmaker who has lived in Cuba since the nineteen-sixties, and who has enjoyed close access to Fidel, showed her documentary about his life at the Havana Film Festival in December, she fretted about what his reaction would be to a sequence in which the narrator mentions "the rumor" that Fidel Castro is the father of seven children and has been married to the same woman for the past thirty years. "I don't know if he's going to like that," she said to me with a nervous laugh, even though she was simply and accurately reporting the basic facts of his biography.

In 1948, when Fidel was in law school, he married Mirta Díaz-Balart, a philosophy student and the daughter of a wealthy and influential Cuban family. In 1949, they had a son, Fidelito. Mirta sued Fidel for divorce five years later, when he was in prison for leading the bloody July 26th assault on the Moncada Army barracks in the eastern city of Santiago, in an ill-fated early bid to oust Batista. The Díaz-Balarts had close ties to Batista. Mirta's brother Rafael was Batista's Vice-Minister of the Interior at the time, and, just before Mirta filed for divorce, Fidel learned that she had been receiving a salary from the Interior Ministry. A bitter custody battle over Fidelito ensued, during which both Mirta and Fidel (who had been released from prison in an amnesty) "kidnapped" the boy on different occasions. In the end, Fidelito was raised and educated under his father's tutelage in Cuba, but he was later allowed to visit Mirta, who had remarried and, like the rest of her family, left Cuba. Mirta lives in Spain, occasionally making discreet trips to Cuba to see her son. In all these years, she has never made a single public statement about Fidel, his revolution, or their marriage. Many Cubans speculate that her long silence is part of a deal she struck in order to retain visiting rights.

Mirta's nephew, Lincoln Díaz-Balart, who was raised in exile in the United States, is a Republican congressman from Florida, and one of Castro's most vociferous foes in Washington. (It was he who arrived at the door of Elián's relatives in Miami early in January and delivered a black Labrador puppy named Dolphin to the boy.) Fidelito, meanwhile, who uses his full surname, Castro Díaz-Balart, grew up to become a nuclear physicist. He was trained in the Soviet Union, and was the director of Cuba's nuclear-energy program until eight years ago, when he was suddenly removed from his post and vanished from view. He has kept a low profile ever since. The rumor in Cuba is that his downfall came about because he fell in love with a Spanish woman and wanted to leave his wife to marry her, and to live in Spain. Fidel is said to have refused to permit this, and to have forced him to stay in Cuba until his ardor cooled.



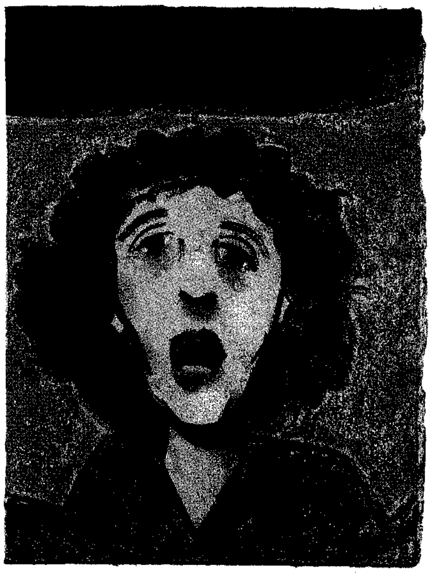
Fidel remained unmarried during the early years of the revolution, and he earned a reputation as a womanizer. He had countless affairs and one-night stands with a string of revolutionary groupies, film starlets, and also, supposedly, several well-known female reporters who came to Cuba to interview him. One of his longer-lasting affairs was with the upper-class Havana beauty Naty Revuelta, who is the mother of his daughter, Alina. In the early sixties, Fidel met Dalia Soto del Valle, a pretty young secretary who was taking part in the revolution's rural literacy campaign. They probably were married, although this has never been officially acknowledged, and have five sons—Alex, Alexis, Alexander, Antonio, and Ángel. All of them live in Cuba and, like their parents, live very privately. Most Cubans do not know their names and would not recognize them on the street if they saw them. The role of First Lady is played by Fidel's sister-in-law, Vilma Espín, the wife of his brother Raúl. Vilma has been the president of the Cuban Women's Federation since its founding in 1960, and she led the mobilization of Cuban mothers in the protests against Elián's kidnapping.

In addition to Fidel's immediate family, one of the great unmentionable topics in Cuba is the nature of his relationship with Celia Sánchez, an aristocratic doctor's daughter who became one of his earliest supporters and his chief confidante. After the triumph of the revolution, Celia, a thin, dramatic-looking woman, remained at Fidel's side. The Cubans I know who were acquainted with both Celia and Fidel say that their bond had a lot to do with the fact that they were both "great conspirers." Celia is said to have been the only person who would stand up to Fidel, and whose opinion he respected. Her death from cancer, in 1980, was particularly hard for him. A friend of Fidel's told me he had always assumed that Fidel and Celia were lovers, although he had never dreamed of asking. He said that even today Fidel sometimes goes alone to Celia's apartment (the approaches to which are closely guarded by armed soldiers and the interior of which is said to have been kept exactly as it was when she died), where he remains for hours at a time.

Fidel's sensitivity to anything that could be construed as disloyal, his extreme personal reticence, and the long tradition of avoiding public debate of policy issues make discussion of the inevitable Cuban "transition" (i.e., what happens when Fidel dies) exceedingly difficult. Dr. Rodrigo Álvarez Cambras, Cuba's foremost orthopedic surgeon and an old Castro family friend, prefers to use the term "succession," as in "Fidel has been preparing his succession for quite some time." Álvarez Cambras is the director of the hospital on the outskirts of Havana where Antonio, Fidel's thirty-one-year-old son, is a surgical intern. "I'm not talking about Raúl," he explains, "but about all the young people who are being put into places of leadership. It's important that the young people are prepared to face the changes that are coming, but also that they are trained with Fidel's ideas."

Raúl Castro, the official successor, is in his late sixties. He is widely perceived to be a brutal hard-liner, and has never inspired the popular affection that his charismatic older brother does. Without the support of the younger generation, it is difficult to imagine what form a successful government led by Raúl might take. A Cuban journalist with a son who is attending college told me that all the boy and his friends talk about is leaving Cuba. "The revolution, all of this," he waved his arm around in a wide arc, "means nothing to them. They just want to go." Fidel himself is said to be deeply worried (a close friend used the term "anguished") about the political disenfranchisement of young Cubans, who represent more than half of the island's eleven million people, and about what he calls "*la obra no terminada*," the unfin-

TAKES



RICHARD MERKIN

Edith Piaf died at seven o'clock in the morning in Paris, and a few hours later on that same recent Friday her friend Jean Cocteau, in his nearby country house at Milly-la-Forêt, suffered a final heart attack, provoked by the news of her demise, and himself died at one o'clock. Yet at noon his incisive, familiar voice, already quasi-posthumous, was heard on the national radio among the hastily collected *hommages* to Piaf's memory, saying, "She died as if consumed by the fire of her fame." This epitaph for her had, in fact, been premature, originally prepared and recorded by him a few months earlier, when, as had been frequent lately, she seemed to be perishing and was given up as lost. But on this precise Friday, by a melodramatic coincidence, her intended epitaph suddenly became apropos for them both, in a confusion of mortal destinies. "La Voix Humaine" and "La Machine Infernale," the titles of Cocteau's two best-known plays, seemed in unexpected referential conjunction on that Friday-noon broadcast.

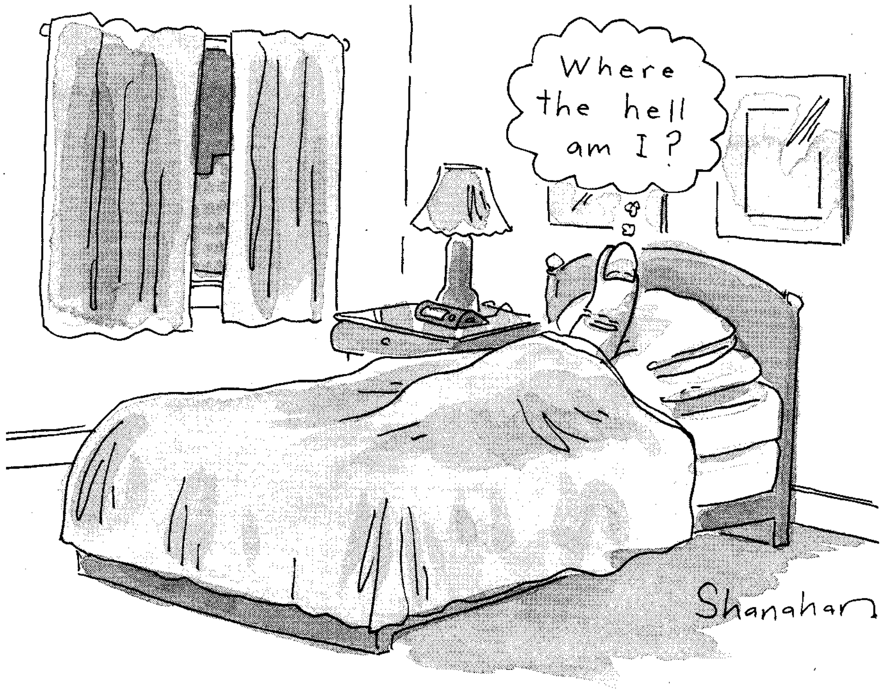
In their opposite places in the French entertainment world, Piaf and Cocteau were known to millions, and in many cases to the same millions, both being legendary *monstres sacrés* for which the French public, from its intellectual summit to its sentimental depths, tends to share an appetite. In her last Paris triumph at the Olympia Music Hall, all that was left of Piaf was all that had ever counted—her immense, infallible voice, which rose to the roof, carrying its enormous, authentic outcry of banal phrases of anguish over lost loves, and poignant despair of happiness that would never arrive. Ravaged, ill, bundled in her customary modest black dress, her pallid little moon face set in its sad, nocturnal smile, she tottered—her thin legs supporting her in faltering obedience to her courage—across the stage to the microphone, to which she clung, and then her voice, that great remnant of her life, burst forth. Her rhythm was always like a beating pulse; she was the unassailable artist, raucously singing her *véridique* songs of truth about her own ancient class, the Paris poor.

—Janet Flanner
Letter from Paris, November 2, 1963

ished nature of the revolutionary project he began more than forty years ago.

Alfredo Guevara, one of the most outspoken of Cuba's old revolutionaries, the so-called *históricos*, agrees sadly that Cuba's official brand of socialism holds no appeal for most young Cubans today, and he fears that unless popular reforms are implemented while Fidel is still alive the ideals of the revolution will be unceremoniously jettisoned once he is gone. Guevara is one of Fidel's oldest and closest friends. I went to see him in mid-December, just after the Havana Film Festival ended. Guevara is the director of Cuba's film institute. He has an impish smile and a smooth, youthful face made owlish by the large spectacles he wears, and his native Spanish bears the guttural traces of a French acquired in Paris during the decade he lived there as Cuba's cultural attaché. He was sitting in a chilly, air-conditioned office, huddled at a desk piled high with books, a jacket thrown over his shoulders like a cape. He was in a reflective mood, as it turned out, because, he explained, he had just suffered a mild heart attack. "You know, Fidel and I are the same age—seventy-three," he said. "I don't wish to speak in terms of last wills and testaments or of deaths, but at our age we can't believe ourselves to be immortal."

Alfredo Guevara has spent most of his life in the service of Fidel's revolution, and he believes that Fidel still holds the key to salvation. "I follow Fidel because I love him—for me he is like a brother," he said. "But I don't follow him because of that alone. I do so because I think there is a historical necessity to do so. I think socialism must be reinvented and that if someone is going to reinvent it he is the person to do it. It cannot be that our biological generation dies out and we leave nothing behind. Maybe nothing will happen, or maybe after us there will be a period in which our inheritors are brutally critical of us, but I believe that, later, another generation will take up the revolution again. *If* we have left something behind." Guevara accepts part of the blame for having participated in a revolution that taught the people the basics of Marxism but neglected a broader cultural world view. "Our generation read Lenin," he said, "but we also read Trotsky, Schopenhauer. Fidel even read French literature. But we had thousands of guerrilla fighters whom we had to transform into leaders, and we couldn't speak about Schopenhauer."


Where the hell am I?
Shanahan

THE MOVING FINGER WRITES; AND, HAVING WRIT, MOVES ON TO A THREE WEEK, TWENTY CITY BOOK TOUR.

A more obvious source of dissatisfaction with the revolution is simply the material hardship that came with it. The income of Dr. Álvarez Cambras, who is sixty-four years old, is an eloquent case in point. His medical skills are internationally renowned (he numbers among his patients Saddam Hussein and his son Uday, whom he successfully rehabilitated after an assassination attempt in 1996 left him half paralyzed), and he holds Cuba's highest honor, a medal declaring him a "Hero of the Revolution," as well as the Légion d'Honneur. Nevertheless, Dr. Álvarez Cambras earns the equivalent of thirty dollars a month, the maximum salary allowed in Cuba. This means, he explained, that he cannot often buy pork, the favorite meat of Cubans. He makes do, he says, by growing bananas in his back yard. He says this uncomplainingly, and adds, with a chuckle, "It is important to have revolutionary fortitude." Dr. Álvarez Cambras undoubtedly has recourse to more than bananas. He travels abroad frequently (he was about to leave for Yemen to perform an operation when I met him), and most Cuban officials who do so receive modest dollar stipends for their expenses from the government before they travel. But his status also poses limitations. While the vast majority of Cubans are able to supplement their impossibly low wages (the average national monthly salary is equivalent to around eight dollars) by buying or selling food, goods, or services on the black market, senior Party cadres have to keep up appearances.

More Cubans are becoming less directly dependent on the revolution all the time. In 1993, during the Special Period following the demise of the Soviet Union, Fidel reluctantly legalized the use of dollars as tender and permitted the introduction of a limited market economy, including joint ventures with foreign companies and a micromanaged private-enterprise sector. The revolutionary battle cry, he told his people, was no longer to "build socialism" but to "save its conquests"—meaning Cuba's state-provided health, education, and social-security programs. Castro also began encouraging foreign tourism, betting that it would soon overtake Cuba's unreliable sugar exports as the primary source of foreign exchange, and he was right. The economy grew by more than six per cent last year.

The evidence that Cuba is already on its way to becoming a capitalist society is overwhelming. It is apparent as soon as you leave Havana's new, postmodern José Martí International Airport terminal and begin the drive into town. A billboard advertises Winston cigarettes, and another heralds the merits of one of the new foreign-owned real-estate companies that are building luxury apartments and villas, exclusively for foreign buyers. The most common sound to be heard in colonial Old Havana—aside from the beat of the bongo drums the many little groups of musicians play in cafés, restaurants, and bars—is the noisy whirr of generators belonging to the construction crews that are restoring buildings everywhere. In Havana harbor, a grand Deco-era ship terminal has been brought back to life, and several Caribbean cruise ships now dock there every week.

"Number Three, please step forward, rip open the bag of garbage, and throw it around."

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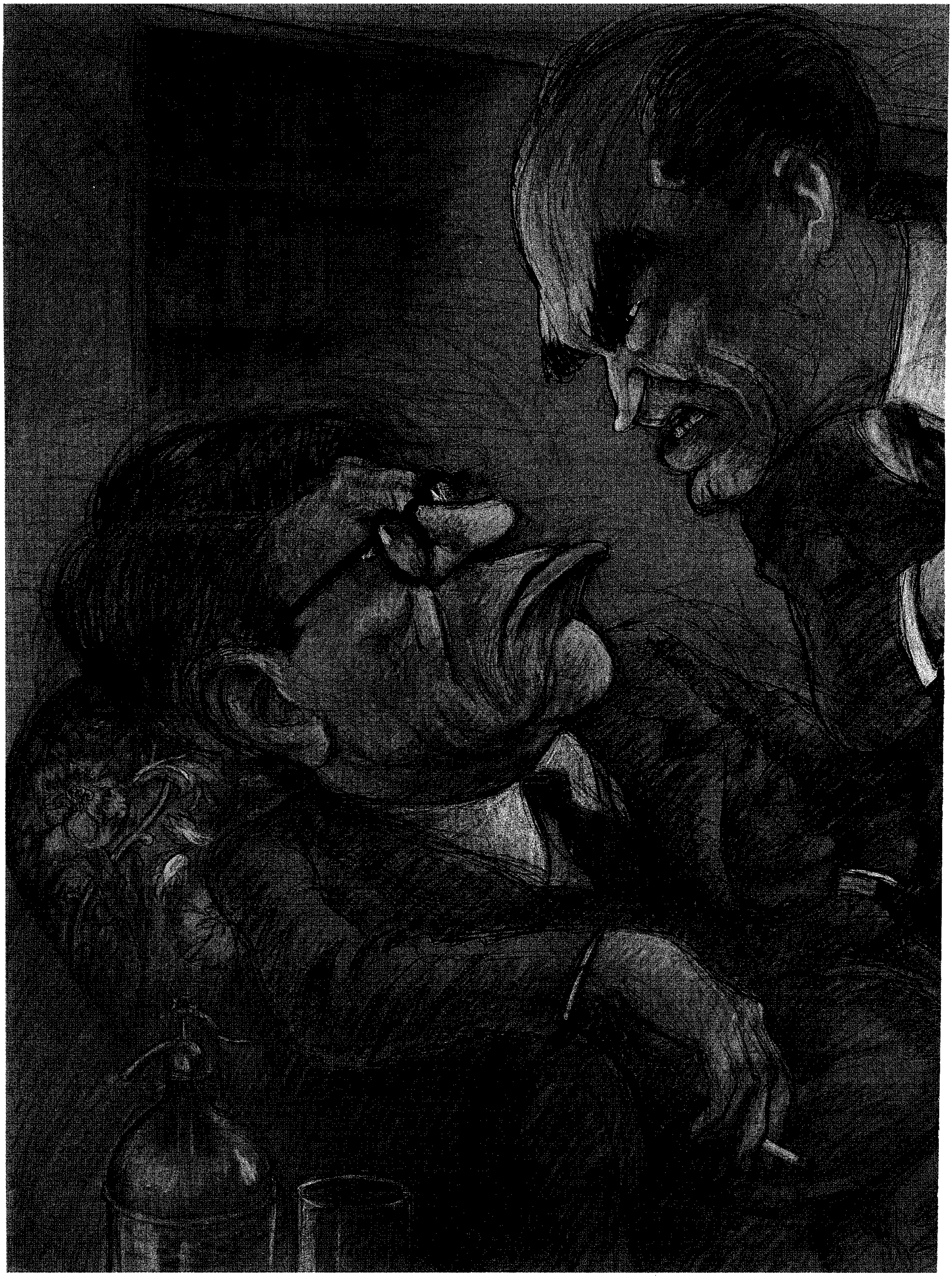
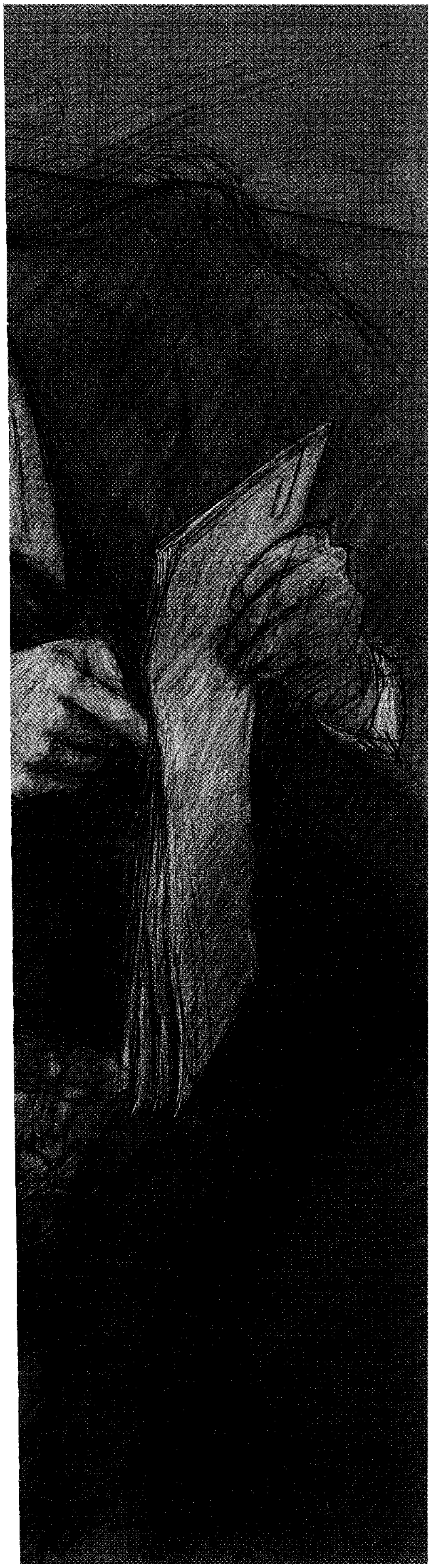
Last month, a Cuban friend said to me, "Do you realize there are more Americans in Havana right now than there have been in forty years?" We calculated that at that moment there were several thousand U.S. citizens in town. In addition to an untold number of Yankee tourists, there were more than six hundred college students here for four days on a "semester at sea" cruise-ship stopover; two hundred and eighty health-care-industry representatives, who had arrived to attend the first American trade exposition to be held in Cuba since the revolution; a baseball team from a Catholic university in Minnesota that had come to play a friendly game against Havana University; forty American writers and their students, who were attending a U.S.-Cuban writers' conference, the first of its kind ever held; and half a dozen other American college groups on academic seminars and field trips. A delegation from San Francisco composed of lawyers, civic leaders, journalists, and businessmen, including the California wine magnate Joseph Gallo, had just left town after a one-week fact-finding trip. All of these "people to people" contacts are in line with the "two-track" policy established in 1992 by the Torricelli Act and expanded by President Clinton last year. Track One is supposed to strengthen the embargo. Track Two is designed to expose Cubans to people who live in a democracy and who will surely inspire them with democratic thoughts.

Havana's shops and cafés are not just filled with foreigners, however. More and more Cubans have access to dollars, either because they have jobs in tourism, where they earn hard-currency tips, or because they work in one of the joint ventures with foreign companies where they earn dollars in salary—or else because they have relatives in Miami who regularly send them money. An estimated eight hundred million dollars a year is being pumped into Cuba's economy through such *remesas* ("remittances") from the Cuban émigré community in Florida and elsewhere, and has become an essential part of the economy, just as it is in many other Latin-American countries with sizable immigrant communities in the United States. The flood of *remesas* is handled by new bank outlets, Western Union offices, and even a few A.T.M. machines, something Cubans had never seen before their installation in Havana a year ago.

It is obvious that life for most Cubans has improved in the past five years. People are better fed and better dressed; there is a hustle and bustle in the streets, and an air of relative optimism. More cars are on the road; fewer people are riding bicycles, which filled the streets during the gas shortages of the Special Period. Besides the rusting Russian Ladas and Moskovitches and the fifties American Studebakers and Ramblers, a plethora of imported cars—Hyundais, Toyotas, Fiats, and Daihatsus—can be seen, and there are more public buses, too, which have eased the nightmarishly long waits that used to be the norm for exhausted commuters. There is still some energy-saving electrical rationing, but it is negligible compared to the six-, ten-, and even eighteen-hour cutoffs of the mid-nineties.

Profits from the dollar-earning sector of the economy are being plowed back into Cuba's infrastructure in order to re-





EASEL BY EDWARD SOREL

LUCE VS. ROSS

Today almost forgotten is *Time*style, overheated method of newswriting by which, in Roaring Twenties, Turbulent Thirties, *Time* sought to put mark on language of Shakespeare, Milton. Featured in adjective-studded *Time*style were inverted syntax (verbs first, nouns later), capitalized compound epithets (Cinemactor Clark Gable, Radiorator H. V. Kaltenborn), astounding neologisms (rescued from Asiatic obscurity were Tycoon, Pundit & Mogul, oft-used still by newshawks, newshens), sometime omission of definite, indefinite articles, ditto final "and"s in series except when replaced by ampersands. Utterly unlike *Time*style was *New Yorker* style. Relied latter heavily then, relies it still on grammatical fanaticism, abhorrence of indirection, insistence on comma before final "and" in series. Short, snappy were *Time's* paragraphs. Long, languid were *The New Yorker's*.

Inevitable, then, that feud would develop between pompous, Yaleducated *Time* Co-Founder Henry Robinson Luce and profane, brush-haired, Aspenborn *New Yorker* Founding Editor Harold Wallace Ross. Fired in 1934 was feud's first shot: long, catty piece on Ross, *New Yorker* in Lucenterprise *Fortune*. Came Ross's riposte two years later, via devastating Wolcott Gibbs Profile of Luce. Weapon of choice: *Time*style itself. Read Profiler Gibbs's choicest jibe: "Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind." Concluded piece: "Where it all will end, knows God!" (Recognized by cognoscenti: inversion of favorite Rossexpletive, "God knows.") Wounded went Luce to Ross's apartment for long, boozy evening of complaint & mollification. Thus was hatchet buried, albeit in jut-jawed, beetle-browed skull of Tycoon Luce and latter's A.O.L.-destined magazinempire.

—*Hendrik Hertzberg*

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activate stalled industries and provide employment. State-run shops that had been shuttered have reopened their doors, bringing some life back to Havana's bleak and decrepit city center. They offer cheap imported clothing and off-brand consumer goods at tightly controlled prices to Cubans who are at the bottom end of the income scale. Nevertheless, the disparity between the new haves and the have-nots, those who have dollars and those who earn only pesos, is growing, and, as Dr. Álvarez Cambras says, "It's not easy to live next to a neighbor who receives a thousand dollars a month and cooks pork every night, and you have to smell it, when you are sitting there with a single fried egg." This encourages what Cubans refer to as "*la doble moral*," or dual morality, in which everyone does what he has to do to get by, illegal or not, while maintaining a façade of *firmeza revolucionaria* — Dr. Álvarez Cambras's "fortitude." Some steal, or work as prostitutes in Cuba's sex market, which thrives despite a recent government crackdown on pimping and prostitution. Others sell stolen boxes of expensive Cuban cigars at knockdown prices on the black market, or antiques and art works to foreign diplomats. A friend of mine who is in his late twenties and works in an imported-television-components assembly plant complained about a popular nightly show in which a psychologist delivers homilies about the problems of everyday life. He said he was angry at the presenter, a well-known figure in Cuba, because on a recent broadcast he had sermonized about Cubans' stealing from their workplaces. "How does he think everyone lives?" he asked. "I'm a state criminal. We all are. It's the only way we can survive."

The panoply of outsiders who are securing a position in Cuba for the post-Castro era include religious groups, which began pouring in after the Pope's trip to Havana in 1998; car dealers, real-estate and resort-hotel companies, and consumer-goods importers. The Golden Tulip hotel chain, which owns a string of casinos, has built a haute-kitsch hotel, the Parque Central, on the edge of José Martí Plaza, in the heart of Old Havana. For the moment, the Parque Central has no casino, but the conventional wisdom is that Golden Tulip is merely biding

"*Can Johnny come out and eat?*"

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its time. Fiat, one of the first Western multinationals allowed to open a franchise in Havana, has a showroom on the Malecón promenade. Few Cubans can buy the cars yet, and for now "La Fiat," with its little café next door, is best known as a hangout for the city's gay community, large numbers of whom congregate every night at tables outside and along the seawall just across the road.

This phenomenon is another symptom of the changing times. There has been a perceptible shift in the parameters of what is acceptable to Fidel and what isn't. The forced-labor camps and official persecution of homosexuals that were a feature of the revolution in the sixties and seventies have long been replaced by a policy of less strenuous disapproval, but until the release, in 1993, of the popular Cuban film "Strawberry and Chocolate," which tackled the problem of homophobia by making the point that a Cuban could be gay and also a good *revolucionario*, public discussion of homosexuality was taboo, and Cuban gays and lesbians kept an extremely low profile.

Around the same time, when dollars became legal and Fidel realized the importance of émigré *remesas*, he authorized a friendlier, more pragmatic policy toward the Cuban exile community in Miami. No longer were all Cubans who left the island branded as counterrevolutionaries or *gusanos*. Cubans who had left but had not become involved in anti-Castro activities were welcomed back in greater numbers—with their dollars—to visit their families. A new policy was also instituted to deal with Cuban writers and artists, whose nonconformist attitudes have always got them into trouble with Fidel. Since the early nineties, "intellectuals" have been permitted to reside abroad in an officially sanctioned velvet exile in such countries as Mexico and Spain, where they can earn a living from their works and also return home whenever they like, as long as they keep their criticism of Fidel and the revolution within discreet boundaries.

In December, I visited Monsignor Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a distinguished writer and the descendant of a venerated nineteenth-century Cuban nationalist hero. I wanted to meet him because I had read a review of his most recent book of essays which noted that one of the pieces dealt with a Spanish king "who didn't have the sense to abdicate when he should have, but, in the end, knew how to die gracefully." The reviewer had remarked that the essay "offered many lessons to us." I met Monsignor Céspedes at his diocese, in an old villa in the western Havana neighborhood of Miramar. He received me in his private office, a room filled with framed portraits of his ancestors and religious pictures, including a big one of Pope John Paul II. I asked the Monsignor if his essay was intended as a parable about Fidel. He smiled and said I could interpret it any way I liked, although the Spanish king was a historical figure who interested him for many reasons. He acknowledged that cultural and economic discussion in Cuba was much more open than it had been ten years ago, but that when it came to politics "the euphemistic debate is still the only one possible."

The Monsignor went on, "How much longer will this situation last? No one knows. But I am certain that when Fidel Castro is not here anymore it will change, gradually. . . . I don't believe Fidel himself is going to change. I believe he will continue to govern and that he will die in office, just as Franco did." Céspedes is by no means a liberal, and believes that Cuba's next government should err on the side of authoritarianism. "Whatever happens, chaos must be avoided. What comes afterward should be a very strong Cuban state—democratic and participatory—but with strong mechanisms of control. This can never be a liberal state, ever." He thinks this is true because of Cuba's prerevolutionary history as a stronghold for the Mafia and because its geography makes it an ideal narcotics-transshipment point between South America and the U.S.

I asked Monsignor Céspedes, who has met with Fidel now and again (he is one of the few members of the Catholic Church hierarchy to have such access), what he thinks Castro's motives are. "Messianism," he replied. "He truly believes he is the savior of Cuba. First, he saved us from North American imperialism, then he defended the Fatherland against Yankee intervention, and now he is the savior of the remnants of socialism."

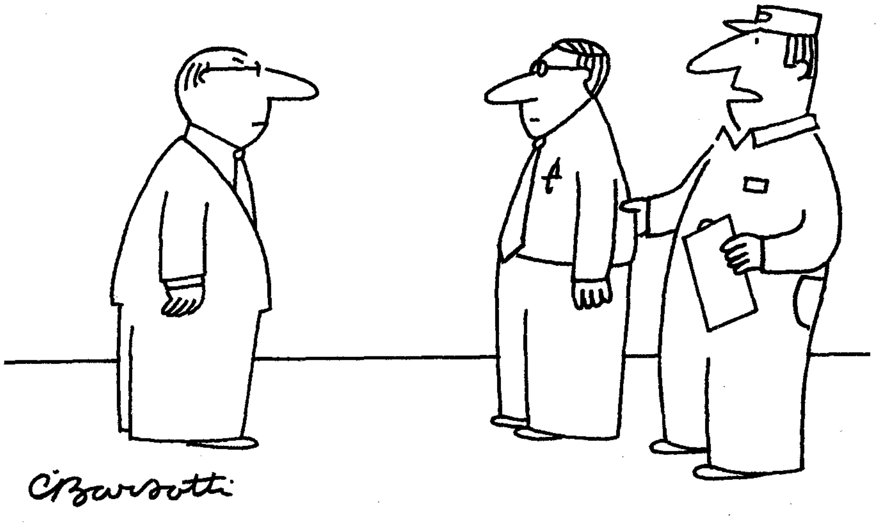
Despite Cuba's improved economic situation, and the opening up of cultural possibilities, a huge percentage of Cubans have indicated their desire to leave the island. In 1998, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service sponsored a lottery for six thousand immigrant visas, and during the month they were available more than five hundred and forty thousand people between the eligible ages of eighteen and fifty-five applied for them. Concomitantly, taking to the seas on rafts and boats is on the increase. A law passed in 1994 permits Cuban immigrants who manage to reach U.S. shores to stay in the country. Those who don't make it to dry land have to go back. Cuban government officials point out that this "wet foot, dry foot" policy has encouraged illegal immigration and is being fuelled by smugglers operating out of Miami, a growing number of whom are being caught and imprisoned in Cuba.

One of the prime spots for setting off for Florida is Cárdenas, a little town eighty miles east of Havana that has become well known in recent weeks because it is the home of Elián González. Cárdenas is an eloquent example of the "unfinished nature" of Fidel's revolution. Separated by only eight miles of narrow road from the tourist-resort peninsula of Varadero, with its stunning beaches and massive, fanciful hotels, Cárdenas is a listless, unkempt place dotted here and there with sun-scorched plazas. It seems to have been bypassed, somehow, by history's advance, like those American towns which disintegrate when a new highway routes traffic away from them. In Cárdenas, sewage flows down the old streets, which are laid out in a colonial grid and fronted by long, irregular lines of weatherbeaten one-story homes painted a patchwork of colors. Horse taxis clip-clop briskly past every few minutes, and people lounge lethargically in their doorways. At a brightly painted, grubby little café with plastic tables and chairs under "Cerveza Cristal" umbrellas, with raucous salsa blasting from a boom box, groups of men and women with all the accoutrements of Cuban *gusanos* or would-be *gusanos* (gold chains, iridescent orange, green, and zebra-striped Lycra bodysuits, fishnet T-shirts, Nikes, and baseball caps) sit nursing beers and smoking. When I was there recently, a mentally ill woman—a rare sight in Havana—wandered in and, talking to herself, began dancing alone to the salsa, her hair twisted into a long little-girl braid. On a nearby street corner, in the late afternoon, a group of freshly dressed young Cubans gathered, waiting for buses to take them to their jobs as waiters, busboys, maids, and cooks in Varadero, which is where Elián's father works, and where his late mother worked as well.

Cárdenas exists because Varadero exists. It slumbers, suspended in its own marginality, more like an emigrants' waiting room than anything else. Which is exactly what it is, by all accounts. The ill-fated boat trip that Elián and his mother took last November was only one of many that have been made from Cárdenas's swampy mangrove shores. The point of land on which the town sits is uniquely situated for emigration: Cubans say that all you have to do is row a boat out a little way and the Gulf Stream current, which sweeps up past the Cuban coastline there in a strong northeasterly arc, will do the rest. Most make it, some don't.

A few weeks ago, a friend of Raúl Castro's was gloating to me about the spectacle of Cuban schoolchildren singing revolutionary hymns and marching on behalf of little Elián. "The gringos have given themselves to us on a silver platter, and we are reaping the rewards," he said. "You know, it's not really important if Elián is returned in the end, because we've already won. Fidel has managed to involve not only the Party cadre in protests but ordinary people, too. And he's reached the young people who were up to nothing before this." The struggle over Elián had solved the problem of national identity. "This is like Cuba's own Cultural Revolution," Raúl's friend said.

Last fall, Fidel launched a campaign that was meant to revive lagging nationalist sentiments and also get the United States to take him more seriously, but it didn't work very well. The campaign took the form of a hundred-and-eighty-billion-dollar lawsuit seeking compensation from the U.S. for suffering inflicted



"No, sir, they don't come with the cubicle—you have to order the cubicle separately."

on the Cuban people by the embargo and other "aggressive policies." By the time I arrived in Havana, early in November, billboards all over town were touting the Demanda del Pueblo, the people's demand for justice in this matter. Cuban friends told me that programs on the Demanda had replaced much of the regular television fare for the two previous months. Most of the people I know rolled their eyes wearily when they talked about this latest of Fidel's "fixations." All their children wanted were the afternoon cartoons back.

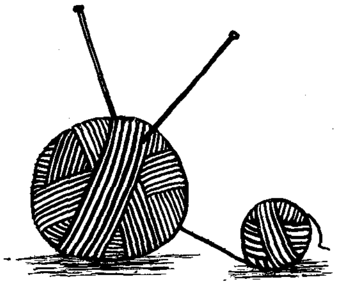
The lawsuit was formally announced to the international community on November 9th, the day of the annual vote in the United Nations about whether or not the U.S. embargo of Cuba should be lifted. As usual, the U.N. voted overwhelmingly against the embargo, this time a hundred and fifty-five to two, with eight abstentions. The two votes in favor of the embargo were cast by the United States and Israel. Ricardo Alarcón, the president of the Cuban National Assembly, pointed out to the delegates in the General Assembly that, since the United States had recently lifted bans on the sale of food and medicine to Iran, Libya, Sudan, and North Korea, the only country that was still denied humanitarian assistance was Cuba.

As usual, the United States pretty much ignored the U.N. vote, and the hundred-and-eighty-billion-dollar lawsuit went largely unreported, which must have been very frustrating for Fidel, since he had been working on the Demanda for months. Then, a week later, the Ibero-American Summit—the biannual gathering of the heads of state of the Latin-American countries, Spain, and Portugal—opened in Havana. This was a proud moment for Fidel, proof that he is a respected statesman. After years of isolation, almost all of Latin America's republics had reopened their embassies in Cuba. New airplane routes had been established and bilateral trade initiated. King Juan Carlos of Spain, the Prime Ministers of Spain and Portugal, and eighteen Latin-American heads of state came. But, despite the fact that more than a thousand journalists from around the world arrived to cover the event, the summit itself seemed of little interest, and the reporters looked around Cuba for other stories, or interviewed Cuban dissidents. "It's as if there weren't even a summit in Cuba," Fidel complained one evening, waving a briefing book of wire-agency bulletins in the air.

The Ibero-American Summit ended on Tuesday, November 16th. The following Sunday, Elián González and his mother left Cárdenas with twelve other people in a rickety boat manned by Elián's mother's boyfriend. On Thanksgiving Day, Elián was plucked from the inner tube he was clinging to, and the next day his father's relatives in Miami took the boy home from the hospital. By that time, a U.S. Border Patrol spokesman had announced that Elián (and two other survivors from the boat) could stay in Florida. On Saturday, Cuba asked for Elián's return, and a complaint signed by his father was filed with the U.N.

In Havana, the Demanda placards all over Havana were replaced by "Return Elián" posters. Fidel had been handed a much more potent vehicle for focussing attention on the injustices inflicted on the Cuban people by a government that remained curiously in thrall to the Miami exile community.

Throughout the Elián saga, Cuban children have been pushed to the front of the protest movement, and the revolutionary Old Guard has been thrilled with their performances, holding them up as proof of the excellence of Cuba's educational system and its superiority to that of the United States. In early December, Fidel visited Elián's school in Cárdenas. He stood at the front of the classroom as Elián's schoolmates, one by one, trooped up to a microphone, where they delivered little speeches asking for their friend's return. A young boy named Yuniel Díaz González said, "Here we have schools, hospitals, we have cinemas, we can go out at night. But there if you go out at night you get attacked. Anything can happen to you. Cuba will always be a socialist and anti-imperialist country, and all of us love our Comandante because he takes care of us! Come back soon, Elián, because here your Fatherland, your people, and your Comandante await you!" Fidel seemed very pleased with this.



A few weeks later, backstage at Havana's Palacio de las Convenciones, I met a chubby ten-year-old girl, Jenny Sotolongo, whose black hair was tied up with ribbons in looping old-fashioned pigtails. Jenny was wearing a tight red dress, knee socks, and clunky black shoes. She had come to the Palacio de las Convenciones as a member of the fifth-grade choral group from the Paulita Concepción primary school. Out in the vast auditorium, a *tribuna de protesta* was under way. This time, doctors and medical students were expressing their concerns for Elián and their own fealty to the revolution that had taught them their trade. Fidel was sitting in the front row of the audience, deep in his seat, watching the proceedings raptly, as if he were at a movie. Above the stage hung a huge painting that was divided into two counterposed scenes. On the right were the brightly colored figures of happy Young Pioneers and the red-white-and-blue colors of the Cuban flag; on the left, black-and-white images included the Statue of Liberty with her hands pressed over her eyes, strands of barbed wire, Donald Duck, and a faceless Adolf Hitler, wearing a swastika armband. Above, in bold letters, there was a quotation from the Cuban poet Cintio Vitier: "The innocence of a child can mobilize an entire nation."

In a few minutes, Jenny told me, she was going to sing a solo onstage. I asked her if she was frightened about performing in front of the Comandante. "Frightened, no. Excited, yes!" she said. Then she marched out and was soon belting a throaty ballad with the aplomb of a young Celine Dion. Her song was about "the importance of children," and her performance brought the house down.

Amid thunderous applause and delighted laughter, Jenny bounced down from the stage, where a woman took her by the hand and led her to Fidel. He leaned forward, patted her face, and exchanged some words with her. Eyes shining, she skipped out of the auditorium. A few minutes later, I found Jenny backstage again and asked her what Fidel had said. "He asked me where I had got my voice from!" she replied breathlessly.

Two days later, at a demonstration at the intersection in Vedado where, in 1961, as the Bay of Pigs invasion began, Fidel had declared "the socialist nature of the Cuban revolution," thus launching Cuba into the Cold War, I watched Jenny perform again. This time, she strode onstage, mike in hand, her little face contorted with anger, and screamed out *"Abajo la gusanera imperialista!"* ("Down with the imperialist worms!"), and *"Devuelvan a Elián!"* ("Return Elián to us!") The crowd repeated the slogans, and Jenny made a pirouette. Then, in her strong, sweet voice, she sang her song about children. A star had been born, a child hero of the revolution.

The police closed down a section of the Malecón one night at the end of January, and a contingent of workmen began bulldozing a small triangular park in front of the U.S. Interests Section. They even dismantled a billboard with the cartoonish figure of a bearded Cuban militiaman saying to Uncle Sam, "Mr. Imperialist, we are absolutely unafraid of you." The men have been busy with cement mixers and dump trucks ever since, working around the clock in shifts to build what appears to be a ramplike plaza. For several days, no official explanation for the activity was given. There was half-facetious speculation that Fidel was putting up a huge platform from which to permanently harangue the Americans, and this turned out to be not far off. Early in February, the government announced that it is building something called "The Plaza of Dignity of the Cuban People."

The new Dignity Plaza is one of the the rather pathetic "Mouse That Roared" details of the dénouement to Fidel's forty-year struggle with the United States. Fidel knows by now, of course, that, whatever happens to Elián, he has pretty much won the most recent battle. One can only imagine what he acknowledges to himself about who will win the war. As a friend in Havana remarked recently, "It's already over. You want to know who won?" He dug into his pocket and pulled out a dollar bill. "This won. The war is over, and no shots were fired." ♦

TAKES

RICHARD MERKIN

They left for the mainland the next morning, taking the six-o'clock boat. Mother got up to say goodbye, but she was the only one, and it is a harsh and an easy scene to imagine—the matriarch and the changeling, looking at each other with a dismay that would seem like the powers of love reversed. I heard the children's voices and the car go down the drive, and I got up and went to the window, and what a morning that was! Jesus, what a morning! The wind was northerly. The air was clear. In the early heat, the roses in the garden smelled like strawberry jam. While I was dressing, I heard the boat whistle, first the warning signal and then the double blast, and I could see the good people on the top deck drinking coffee out of fragile paper cups, and Lawrence at the bow, saying to the sea, *"Thalassa, thalassa,"* while his timid and unhappy children watched the creation from the encirclement of their mother's arms. The buoys would toll mournfully for Lawrence, and while the grace of the light would make it an exertion not to throw out your arms and swear exultantly, Lawrence's eyes would trace the black sea as it fell astern; he would think of the bottom, dark and strange, where full fathom five our father lies.

Oh, what can you do with a man like that? What can you do? How can you dissuade his eye in a crowd from seeking out the cheek with acne, the infirm hand; how can you teach him to respond to the inestimable greatness of the race, the harsh surface beauty of life; how can you put his finger for him on the obdurate truths before which fear and horror are powerless? The sea that morning was iridescent and dark. My wife and my sister were swimming—Diana and Helen—and I saw their uncovered heads, black and gold in the dark water. I saw them come out and I saw that they were naked, unshy, beautiful, and full of grace, and I watched the naked women walk out of the sea.

—John Cheever
"Goodbye, My Brother" (Fiction),
August 25, 1951

LIFE AND LETTERS

TRAVELS WITH CHEKHOV

A literary pilgrimage turns into a real-life adventure.

BY JANET MALCOLM

After they have slept together for the first time, Dmitri Dmitrich Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna Von Diderits, the hero and heroine of Anton Chekhov's story "The Lady with the Dog" (1899), drive out at dawn to a village near Yalta called Oreanda, where they sit on a bench near a church and look down on the sea. "Yalta was hardly visible through the morning mist; white clouds stood motionless on the mountain-tops," Chekhov writes at the start of the famous passage that continues:

> The leaves did not stir on the trees, grasshoppers chirruped, and the monotonous hollow sound of the sea rising up from below, spoke of the peace, of the eternal sleep awaiting us. So it must have sounded when there was no Yalta, no Oreanda here; so it sounds now, and it will sound as indifferently and monotonously when we are all no more. And in this constancy, in this complete indifference to the life and death of each of us, there lies hid, perhaps, a pledge of our eternal salvation, of the unceasing movement of life upon earth, of unceasing progress towards perfection. Sitting beside a young woman who in the dawn seemed so lovely, soothed and spellbound in these magical surroundings—the sea, mountains, clouds, the open sky—Gurov thought how in reality everything is beautiful in this world when one reflects: everything except what we think or do ourselves when we forget our human dignity and the higher aims of our existence.

Today, I am sitting on that same bench near the church looking at the same view. Beside me is my English-speaking guide, Nina (I know no Russian), and a quarter of a mile away a driver named Yevgeny waits in his car at the entrance to the footpath leading to the lookout point where Gurov and Anna sat, not yet aware of the great love that lay before them. I am a character in a new drama: the absurdist farce of the literary pilgrim who leaves the magical pages of a work of genius and travels to an "original scene," which can only fall short of his expectations. However, because Nina and Yevgeny have gone to some trouble to find the spot, I pretend to be thrilled by it. Nina—a large woman in her late sixties, with short, straight blond hair, forget-me-not-blue eyes, and an open, passionate nature—is gratified. She breaks into song. "It's a big, wide, wonderful world that we live in," she sings, and then asks, "Do you know this song?" When I say I do, she tells me that Deanna Durbin sang it in the 1948 film "For the Love of Mary."

"Do you like Deanna Durbin?" she asks. I say yes.

"I adore Deanna Durbin," Nina says. "I have adored her since I was a girl."

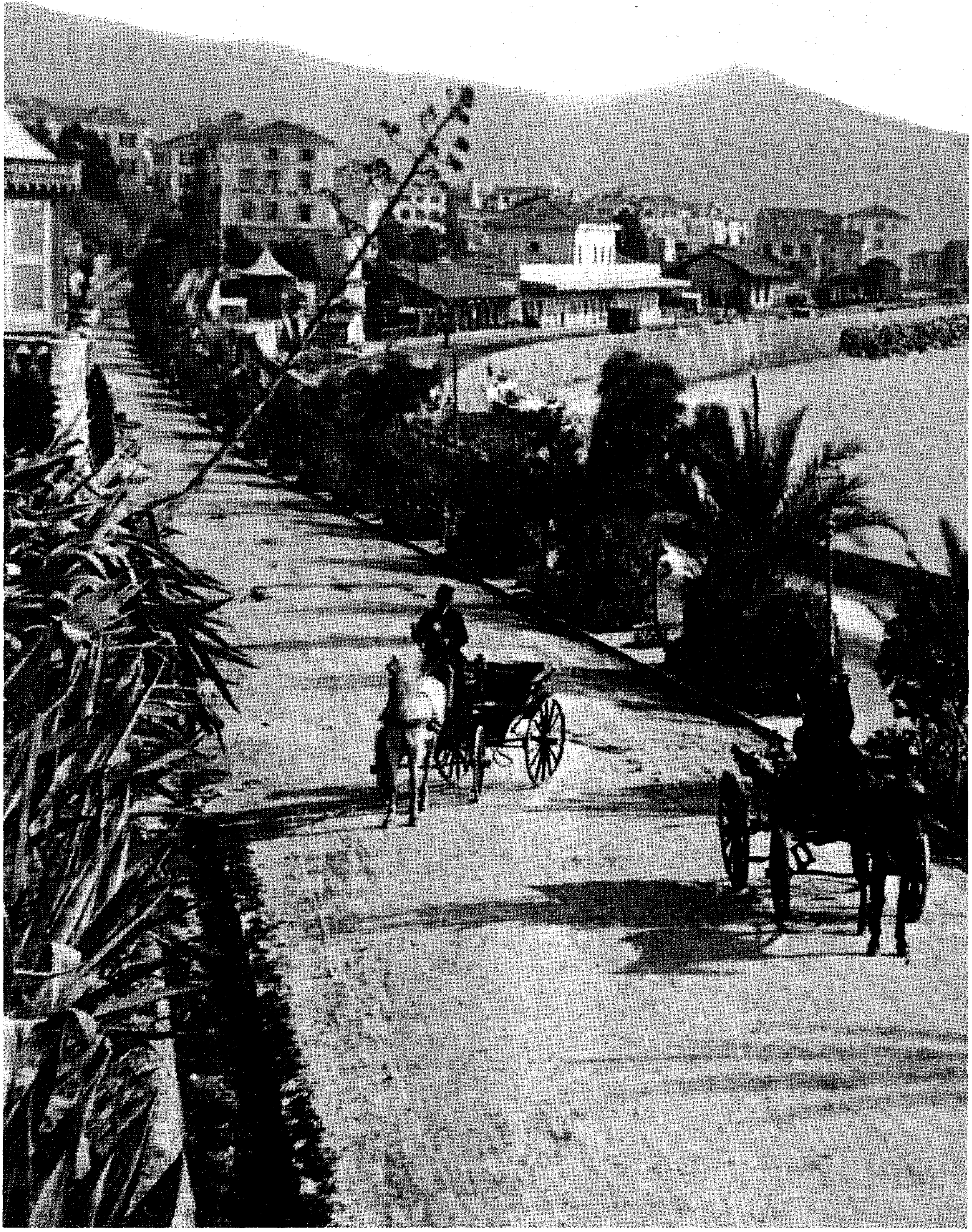
She tells me of a chance encounter in a church in Yalta, two years earlier, with an Englishwoman named Muriel, who turned out to be another adorer of Deanna Durbin, and who subsequently invited her to the annual conference of an organization called the Deanna Durbin Society, which was held that year in Scarborough, England. Nina owns videos of all Deanna Durbin's movies and knows all the songs Deanna Durbin sang. She offers to give me the address of the Deanna Durbin Society.

Nina was born and educated in St. Petersburg and, after studying languages at the university there, became an Intourist guide, presently moving to Yalta. She has retired, and, like most retirees in the former Soviet Union, she cannot live on her pension. She now hires out as an independent guide and waits for assignments from the Hotel Yalta, currently the only habitable hotel in the town. My trip to Yalta is a stroke of good fortune for her; she had not worked for a long time when the call from the hotel came.

It is the second day of my acquaintance with Nina, the third day of my stay at the Hotel Yalta, and the ninth day of my trip to the former Soviet Union. I have worked my way south from St. Petersburg and Moscow. My arrival in Yalta was marked by an incident that rather dramatically brought into view something that had lain just below my consciousness as I pursued my itinerary of visits to houses where Chekhov lived and places he had written about. I had flown from Moscow to Simferopol, the nearest town to Yalta with an airport, an hour-and-a-half drive away. Chekhov lived in Yalta during much of the last five years of his life. (He died in July, 1904.) At that time, exile to places with mild climates, like the Crimea and the Riviera, was the favored therapy for tuberculosis, into whose last stages Chekhov was entering in the late eighteen-nineties. He built a handsome villa a few miles outside the city center, in a suburb called Autka, and also bought a small cottage on the water in a seaside Tatar village called Gurzuf. He wrote "The Three Sisters" and "The Cherry Orchard," as well as "The Lady with the Dog" and "The Bishop," in these houses.

At the Simferopol airport, as I stood in line at the immigration counter waiting to have my passport and visa stamped, I saw, as if in a dream's slow motion, a man in the baggage area on the other side of a glass panel walk out of the building with my suitcase in his hand. The hallucination proved to be real.

TOP: ITAR-TASS/SOVFOTO; RIGHT: SCR PHOTO LIBRARY



Chekhov (opposite), in Yalta, where he was sent with tuberculosis in the late eighteen-nineties. In a letter from that time, he describes the town as "a mixture of something European that reminds one of the views of Nice, with something cheap and shoddy."

In a daze, I filled out a lost-luggage form and followed an English-speaking woman who worked for the Hotel Yalta to a car in the parking lot. She said she would trace my luggage and disappeared. The driver—the same Yevgeny who now sits in the car in Oreanda—drove me to the hotel in silence, his English and my Russian in exact equilibrium.

As we neared the Black Sea coast, the Ukrainian farm country gave way to a terrain resembling—and, in the variety and beauty of its vegetation, surpassing—that of the Riviera corniches. The winding road offered views of mountains and glimpses of the sea below. But when the Hotel Yalta came into view I caught my breath at its spectacular ugliness. It is a monstrous building—erected in 1975, with a capacity of twenty-five hundred people—that is like a brute's blow in the face of the countryside. Its scale would be problematic anywhere, and on the hillside above Yalta it is catastrophic. Hundreds of—possibly a thousand—identical balconies jut out from a glass-and-concrete façade. The approach is an American supermarket-style parking lot. The vast low-ceilinged lobby, with black marble floors and metallic walls, looks as if a failing bank had been crossed with a seedy night club. In one corner there is a bar, and along one wall stands a row of slot machines. A great expanse of empty black marble floor lies between the slot machines and the hotel's front desk. When I entered the lobby, it was almost completely empty: two or three men were playing the slot machines and a couple sat at the bar. At the reception desk, I was given a key to a room on the fourth floor, and, after walking down an almost satirically long empty corridor, I opened the door to a cubicle about eight by twelve feet, pleasingly furnished in the blond-wood Scandinavian Modern style of the fifties and sixties, and affording just enough room for a double bed, a small round table with two chairs, an armchair, and a minuscule refrigerator. My little balcony—like its myriad replicas—offered a glimpse of the sea and a view of large swimming pools, tennis courts, various outbuildings, and an auditorium. No one was in the pools or on the courts, but American popular music blared out of a loudspeaker. I shut the glass door to muffle the sound and hopefully opened the refrigerator. It was empty. In the bathroom, I found serviceable fixtures and a soap dish of plastic made to resemble brown marble.

On my arrival, an unsmiling young man named Igor, who spoke fluent English, had approached me in the lobby and led me to his office, where he enumerated the activities that had been arranged for the next two days with Nina and Yevgeny. These had been prepaid, and he wanted me to understand that anything more would cost extra. (The trip to Oreanda would be one such addition.) When I mentioned my lost luggage and asked if there was somewhere I could buy a nightgown and a change of clothes, he looked at his watch and said that if I walked down to the town—a twenty- or thirty-minute walk—I might still find some clothing stores open.

As I walked to the town in the late-afternoon sunlight, down a road fragrant with smells of the trees and shrubs and wildflowers that lined it, and left the horrible hotel behind, I felt a stir of happiness. Though it was May, St. Petersburg had been icily wintry and Moscow only a few degrees warmer. But here it was true spring; the air was fresh and soft. In a few months—I knew from "The Lady with the Dog"—Yalta would be hot and dusty. On the day Gurov and Anna became lovers, "it was sultry indoors, while in the street the wind whirled the dust round and round and blew people's hats off. It was a thirsty day, and Gurov often went into the pavilion, and pressed Anna Sergeyevna to have syrup and water or an ice. One did not know what to do with oneself." In the evening, after mingling with a crowd at the harbor that has gathered to meet a ship coming in, Gurov kisses Anna, and they go to her hotel. After they have made love, Anna sits dejected, "like 'the woman who was a sinner' in an old fashioned picture," and Gurov callously cuts himself a slice of watermelon and eats it "without haste." Gurov's unforgettable gesture—the mark of the cold roué that he is—only deepens the mystery and heightens the poignancy of his later transformation into a man capable of serious love.

As I walked on, small village houses of a familiar old sort began to appear. Yalta seemed untouched by the hands that had heaved my monstrous hotel into the hillside above it. Along the seafront, some changes had of course taken place since Gurov and Anna strolled there. In the square opposite the harbor stood a huge statue of Lenin, gesturing toward the sea; and the harbor itself had become the site of a kiddie park, outfitted with garishly colored cartoon figures. The shops along the tree-lined promenade—selling film and suntan lotion and mermaid dolls and souvenir china—had a neglected, unvisited air; perhaps business would pick up in the hot, dusty season. Many were closed for the day, among them the clothing stores. When Chekhov visited Yalta for the first time, in July, 1888, he disparaged it thus to his sister Maria: "Yalta is a mixture of something European that reminds one of the views of Nice, with something cheap and shoddy. The box-like hotels in which unhappy consumptives are pining, the impudent Tatar faces, the ladies' bustles with their very undisguised expression of something very abominable, the faces of the idle rich, longing for cheap adventures, the smell of perfumery instead of the scent of the cedars and the sea, the miserable dirty pier, the melancholy lights far out at sea, the prattle of young ladies and gentlemen who have crowded here in order to admire nature of which they have no idea—all this taken together produces such a depressing effect and is so overwhelming that one begins to blame oneself for being biased and unfair."

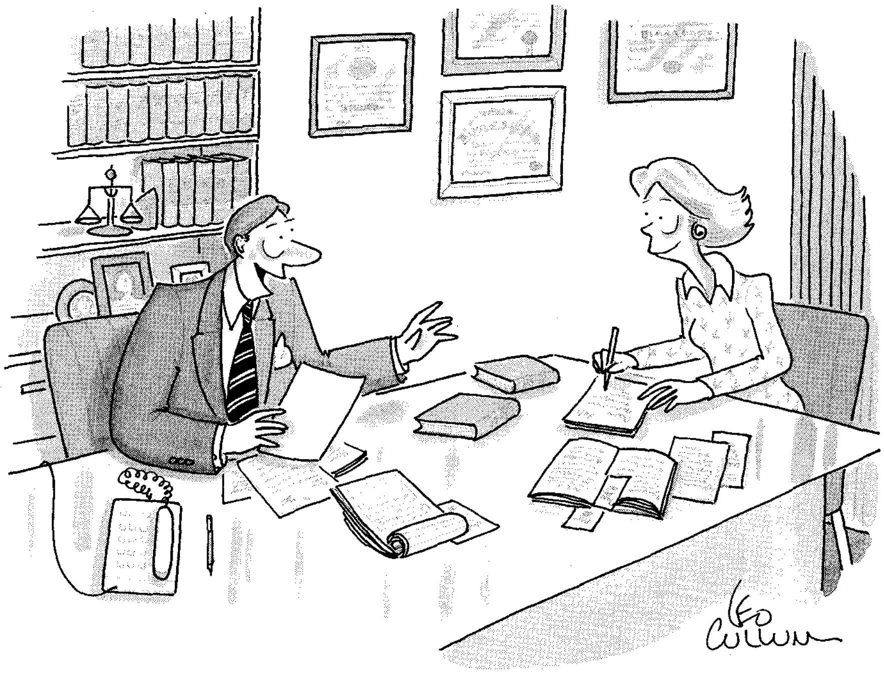
I began my ascent back up the hill. The sun was nearing the horizon, and there was a chill in the air. The weight of being thousands of miles from home with nothing to wear but the clothes on my back fell on me. I tried to pull myself together, to rise above my petty obsession with the loss of a few garments, and to that end invoked Chekhov and the heightened sense of what is important in life that gleams out of his work. The shadow of mortality hovers over his texts; his characters repeatedly remind one another that "we all have to die" and that "life is not given twice." Chekhov himself needed no such reminders: the last decade of his life was a daily struggle with increasingly virulent pulmonary and intestinal tuberculosis. And yet when he was dying, in the spa of Badenweiler, where he had stupidly been sent by a specialist, he wrote letters to Maria in which he repeatedly complained not about his fate but about how badly German women dressed. "Nowhere do women dress so abominably. . . . I have not seen one beautiful woman, nor one who was not trimmed with some kind of absurd braid," he wrote on June 8, 1904, and then, on June 28th—in his last letter to anyone and his last comment on anything—"There is not a single decently dressed German woman. The lack of taste makes one depressed."

I continued climbing the hill, in the inflexible grip of unhappiness over my lost clothes. And then the realization came: the recognition that when my suitcase was taken something else had been restored to me—feeling itself. Until the mishap at the airport, I had not felt anything very much. Without knowing exactly why, I have always found travel writing a little boring, and now the reason seemed clear: travel itself is a low-key emotional experience, a pallid affair in comparison with ordinary life. When Gurov picks up Anna at an outdoor restaurant (approaching her through her dog), they converse thus:

> "Have you been long in Yalta?" [he says].
> "Five days."
> "And I have already dragged out a fortnight here." There was a brief silence.
> "Time goes fast, and yet it is so dull here!" she said, not looking at him.
> "That's only the fashion to say it is dull here. A provincial will live in Belyov or Zhidra and not be dull, and when he comes here it's 'Oh the dullness! Oh, the dust!' One would think he came from Granada."

Although the passage functions (as Vladimir Nabokov pointed out) as an illustration of Gurov's attractive wit, it also expresses the truth that had just been revealed to me, and that Chekhov's Yalta exile revealed to him—that our homes are Granada. They are where the action is; they are where the riches of experience are distributed. On our travels, we stand before paintings and look at scenery, and sometimes we are moved, but rarely are we as engaged with life as we are in the course of any ordinary day in our usual surroundings. Only when faced with one of the inevitable minor hardships of travel do we break out of the trance of tourism and once again feel the sharp savor of the real. ("I have never met anyone who was less a tourist," Maxim Kovalevsky, a professor of sociology whom Chekhov met in Nice in 1897, wrote of his compatriot, and went on to say that "visiting museums, art galleries, and ruins exhausted rather than delighted him. . . . In Rome I found myself obliged to assume the role of guide, showing him the Forum, the ruins of the palace of the Caesars, the Capitol. To all of this he remained more or less indifferent.") Chekhov was deeply bored in Yalta before he built his house and put in his garden, and even afterward he felt as if he had been banished, and that life was elsewhere. When he wrote of the three sisters' yearning for Moscow, he was expressing his own sense of exile. "One does not know what to do with oneself."

Chekhov's villa in Autka—Nina took me there on our first day together—is a two-story stucco house of distinguished, unornamented, faintly Moorish architecture, with an extensive, well-ordered garden and spacious rooms that look out over Yalta to the sea. Maria Chekhova, who lived until 1957, preserved the house and garden, fending off Nazi occupiers during the war and enduring the insults of the Stalin and Khrushchev periods. It remains furnished as in Chekhov's time: handsomely, simply, elegantly. As Chekhov cared about women's dress (it does not go unnoted in his work, and is always significant), he cared about the furnishings of his houses. Perhaps his love of order and elegance was innate, but more likely it was a reaction against the disorder and harshness of his early family life. His father, Pavel Yegorovich, was the son of a serf who had managed to buy his freedom and that of his wife and children. Pavel rose in the world and became the owner of a grocery store in Taganrog, a town with a large foreign (mostly Greek) population, on the Sea of Azov, in southern Russia. The store, as Chekhov's best biographer, Ernest J. Simmons, characterizes it, resembled a New England general store—selling things like kerosene, tobacco, yarn, nails, and home remedies—though, unlike a New England store, it also sold vodka, which was consumed on the premises in a separate room. In Simmons's description, the place had "filthy debris on the floor, torn soiled oilcloth on the counters, and in summer, swarms of flies settled everywhere. An unpleasant mélange of odors emanated from the exposed



"Listen. It's at the quiet moments like this that you can actually hear the meter running."

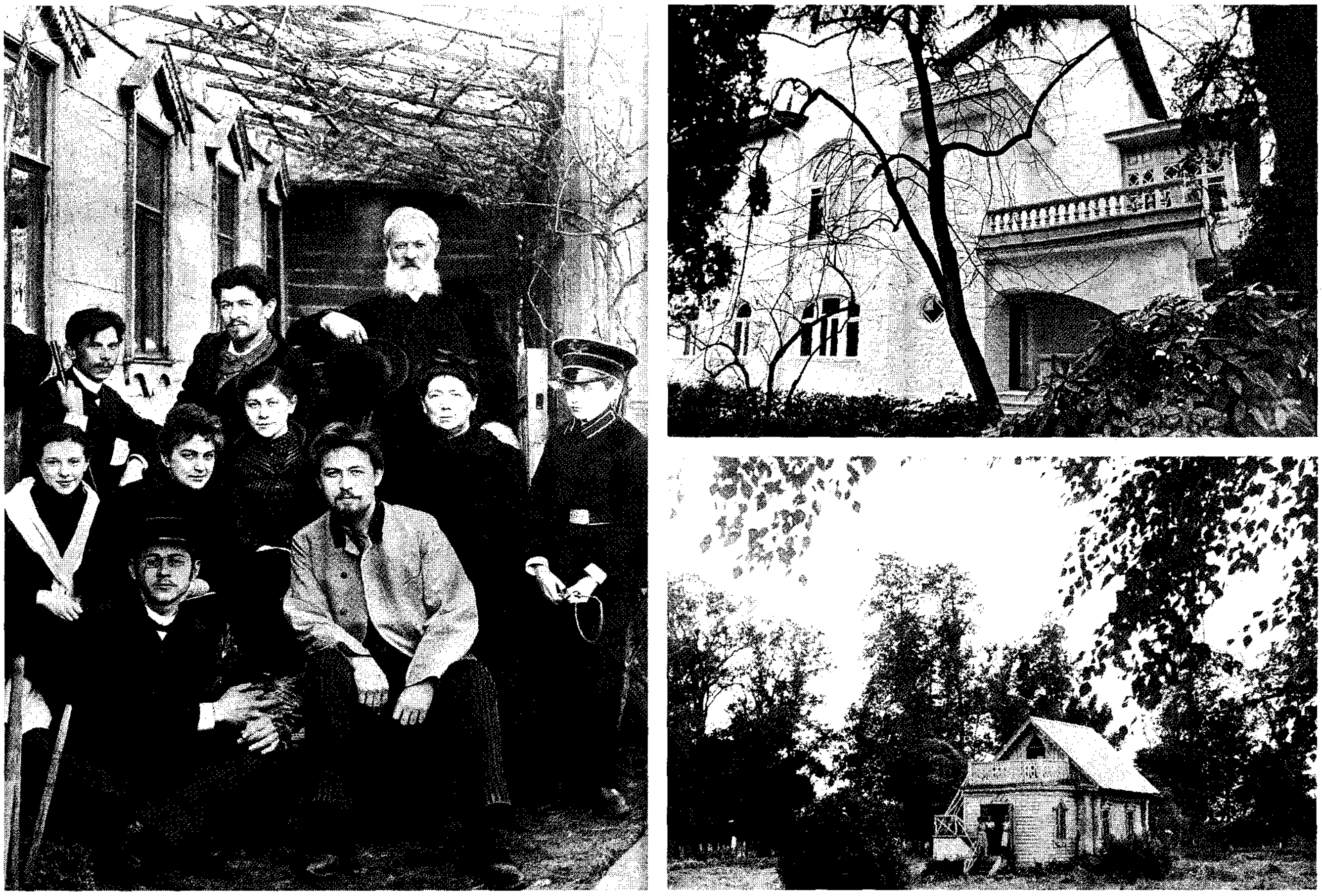
Chekhov in his study in Yalta, where he wrote "The Three Sisters," "The Cherry Orchard," and "The Lady with the Dog."

goods: the sugar smelled of kerosene, the coffee of herring. Brazen rats prowled about the stock."

Chekhov's oldest brother, Alexander, in a memoir of Anton, wrote of a freezing winter night on which "the future writer," then a nine-year-old schoolboy, was dragged by his father from the warm room where he was doing his homework and made to mind the unheated store. The account lays stress on the cruelty of the father and the misery of the boy, and is crudely written, in a sort of penny-dreadful style. The reticent Anton himself left no memoir of his childhood sorrows, though there are passages in his stories that are assumed to refer to them. In his long story "Three Years" (1895), for example, the hero, Laptev, says to his wife, "I can remember my father correcting me—or, to speak plainly, beating me—before I was five years old. He used to thrash me with a birch, pull my ears, hit me on the head, and every morning when I woke up my first thought was whether he would beat me that day." In a letter of 1894, to his publisher and close friend Alexei Suvorin, Chekhov permitted himself the bitter reflection that "I acquired my belief in progress when still a child; I could not help believing in it, because the difference between the period when they flogged me and the period when they stopped flogging me was enormous." Chekhov had what he described to another correspondent, in 1899, as "autobiographophobia." The correspondent was Grigory Rossolimo, who had been a classmate in medical school, and had written to Chekhov to ask him for an autobiography for an album he was assembling for a class reunion—which Chekhov supplied, but not before expressing his reluctance to write about himself. Seven years earlier, when V. A. Tikhonov, the editor of a journal called *Sever*, asked him for biographical information to accompany a photograph, Chekhov made this reply:

> Do you need my biography? Here it is. In 1860 I was born in Taganrog. In 1879 I finished my studies in the Taganrog school. In 1884 I finished my studies in the medical school of Moscow University. In 1888 I received the Pushkin Prize. In 1890 I made a trip to Sakhalin across Siberia and back by sea. In 1891 I toured Europe, where I drank splendid wine and ate oysters. In 1892 I strolled with V. A. Tikhonov at [the writer Shcheglov's] name day party. I began to write in 1879 in *Strekosa*. My collections of stories are Motley Stories, Twilight, Stories, Gloomy People, and the novella The Duel. I have also sinned in the realm of drama, although moderately. I have been translated into all languages with the exception of the foreign ones. However, I was translated into German quite a while ago. The Czechs and Serbs also approve of me. And the French also relate to me. I grasped the secrets of love at the age of thirteen. I remain on excellent terms with friends, both physicians and writers. I am a bachelor. I would like a pension. I busy myself with medicine to such an extent that this summer I am going to perform some autopsies, something I have not done for two or three years. Among writers I prefer Tolstoy, among physicians, Zakharin. However, this is all rubbish. Write what you want. If there are no facts, substitute something lyrical.

Maxim Gorky wrote of Chekhov that "in the presence of Anton Pavlovich, everyone felt an unconscious desire to be simpler, more truthful, more himself." Chekhov's mock biography produces a similar chastening effect. After reading it, one can only regard any attempt at self-description



Clockwise from left: Chekhov, in Moscow, with family and friends; the writer's villa in Yalta; and the lodge at Melikhovo.

that is longer and less playful as pretentious and rather ridiculous.

"This morning, I felt giddy," Nina tells me at the lookout in Oreanda. "I was afraid I would not be able to come today. Fortunately, I am better." I question her about her symptoms and urge her to see a doctor. She explains that she hasn't the money for a doctor—doctors can no longer get by on their salaries from the state and now charge for their services. I ask if there are clinics, and she says yes, but they are overcrowded—one has to wait interminably. She finally agrees to go to a clinic the next day to have her blood pressure checked. Nina and I took to each other immediately. She is extremely likable. Because she is large and I am small, she has taken to giving me impulsive bear hugs and calling me her little one—for lack of a better equivalent for the Russian diminutive. Over the two days we have been together, I have received an increasing sense of the pathos of her life. She is poor. Her apartment is too small, she says, to keep a cat in. The dress she is wearing was given to her by an Englishwoman whose guide she was a few years ago. She is grateful when clients give her leftover shampoo and hand cream; nothing is too small. Earlier in the day, during a visit to the Livadia Palace, where the Yalta agreement was signed, she told me that as a young child she lived through the nine-hundred-day siege of Leningrad. Her grandparents died during the siege, and her parents' lives, she said, had been shortened because of the sacrifices they made for their children. Now, as she talks about the leftover shampoo, I think about the large tip I will give her at the end of the day, anticipating her surprise and pleasure. Then a suspicion enters my mind: has she been putting on an act and playing on my sympathy precisely so that I will give her money? A week earlier, in St. Petersburg, someone else had used the term "putting on an act." I had been walking along the Nevsky Prospect with my guide, Nelly, when I was stopped in my tracks by the horrifying sight of an old woman lying face down on the pavement, convulsively shaking, a cane on the ground just out of reach of the trembling hand from which it had fallen. As I started to go to her aid, Nelly put her hand on my arm and said, "She lies here like this every day. She is a beggar." She added, "I don't know if she's putting on an act or not." I looked at her in disbelief. "Even if she's acting, she must be in great need," Nelly allowed. I then noticed a paper box with a few coins in it sitting on the ground near the cane. As the occasional passerby added a coin to the box, the woman took no notice; she simply continued to shake.

If Nina is acting, I think, she, too, must be impelled by desperation, but I decide that she is on the level. There is an atmosphere of truth about her. She is like one of Chekhov's guileless innocents; she is Anna Sergeyevna in late middle age. We rise from the seat and walk over to a semicircular stone pavilion at the edge of the cliff. Names and initials have been pencilled on or scratched into the stone. In Chekhov's story "Lights," the hero, an engineer named Ananyev, speaks of a decisive youthful encounter in a stone summer-

OPPOSITE: SCR PHOTO LIBRARY; LEFT AND BOTTOM: SOVFOTO; TOP: ITAR-TASS/SOVFOTO

house above the sea, and offers this theory of graffiti:

> When a man in a melancholy mood is left *tête-à-tête* with the sea, or any landscape which seems to him grandiose, there is always, for some reason, mixed with melancholy, a conviction that he will live and die in obscurity, and he reflectively snatches up a pencil and hastens to write his name on the first thing that comes handy. And that, I suppose, is why all convenient solitary nooks like my summer-house are always scrawled over in pencil or carved with pen-knives.

Ananyev is another of Chekhov's redeemed womanizers, though he undergoes his transformation of soul after hideously betraying the story's gentle, trusting heroine, Kisotchka. The story was written eleven years before "The Lady with the Dog," and it was not well received. "I was not entirely satisfied with your latest story," the novelist and playwright Ivan Shcheglov wrote to Chekhov on May 29, 1888, and went on:

> Of course I swallowed it in one gulp, there is no question about that, because everything you write is so appetizing and real that it can be easily and pleasantly swallowed. But that finale—"You can't figure out anything in this world . . ."—is abrupt; it is certainly the writer's job to figure out what goes on in the heart of his hero; otherwise his psychology will remain unclear.

Chekhov replied, on June 9th:

> I take the liberty of disagreeing with you. A psychologist should not pretend to understand what he does not understand. Moreover, a psychologist should not convey the impression that he understands what no one understands. We shall not play the charlatan, and we will declare frankly that nothing is clear in this world. Only fools and charlatans know and understand everything.

To Suvorin, who had also criticized the story's apparent inconclusiveness (his letter has not survived), Chekhov wrote:

> The artist is not meant to be a judge of his characters and what they say; his only job is to be an impartial witness. I heard two Russians in a muddled conversation about pessimism, a conversation that solved nothing; all I am bound to do is reproduce that conversation exactly as I heard it. Drawing conclusions is up to the jury, that is, the readers. My only job is to be talented, that is, to know how to distinguish important testimony from unimportant, to place my characters in the proper light and speak their language.

Not tonight, dear.
I have carpal-tunnel syndrome.
MARISA ACOCELLA

These disclaimers—which have been much quoted and are of a piece with what we know of Chekhov's attractive unpretentiousness—cannot be taken at face value, of course. Chekhov understood his characters very well (he invented them, after all), and his stories are hardly deadpan journalistic narratives. But his pose of journalistic uninquisitiveness is no mere writer's waffle produced to ward off unwelcome discussion. It refers to something that is actually present in the work, to a kind of bark of the prosaic in which Chekhov consistently encases a story's vital poetic core, as if such protection were necessary for its survival. The stories have a straightforward, natural, rational, modern surface; they have been described as modest, delicate, gray. In fact, they are wild and strange, archaic and brilliantly colored. But the wildness and strangeness and archaism and brilliant colors are concealed, as are the complexity and difficulty. "Everything you write is so appetizing and real that it can be easily and pleasantly swallowed." We swallow a Chekhov story as if it were an ice, and we cannot account for our sense of repletion.

To be sure, all works of literary realism practice a kind of benevolent deception, lulling us into the state we enter at night when we mistake the fantastic productions of our imaginations for actual events. But Chekhov succeeds so well in rendering his illusion of realism and in hiding the traces of his surrealism that he remains the most misunderstood—as well as the most beloved—of the nineteenth-century Russian geniuses. In Russia, no less than in our country, possibly even more than in our country, Chekhov attracts a kind of sickening piety. You utter the word "Chekhov" and people arrange their features as if a baby deer had come into the room. "Ah, Chekhov!" my guide in Moscow—a plump, blond, heavily made-up woman named Sonia—had exclaimed. "He is not a Russian writer. He is a writer for all humanity!" Chekhov would have relished Sonia. He might have—in fact he had—used her as a character. She was a dead ringer for Natasha, the crass sister-in-law in "The Three Sisters," who pushes her way into control of the Prozorov household and pushes out the three delicate, refined sisters. Sonia saw her job as guide as an exercise in control, and over the two days I spent with her I grew to detest her—though never in the serious way one comes to detest Natasha. My struggle with Sonia was almost always over small-stake points of touristic arrangement; and her power to get to me was, of course, further blunted by my journalist's wicked awareness of the incalculable journalistic value of poor character. After delivering herself of her estimate of Chekhov, Sonia went on to speak of her unpleasant experience with certain previous American clients who had put her down. "They considered themselves superior to me," she said, but when I asked her how they had shown this she couldn't say. "I just felt it." Then she added (as I somehow knew she would) that it was never the rich Americans who made her feel inferior, always the other kind.

One of my major battles with Sonia was over the issue of a two-hour visit to the Armory in the Kremlin, scheduled for the next day and, in Sonia's view, the high point of my—of every—trip to Russia. I asked her what was in the Armory, and, when she told me that it was a "magnificent" collection of armor and ancient gold and gems and Fabergé eggs, I said that that kind of thing didn't interest me, and that I would just as soon skip it. Sonia looked at me as if I had gone mad. Then she abruptly said that skipping the Armory was impossible: the tour was scheduled, and it was too late to change the schedule. I repeated that I would prefer not to go to the Armory, and Sonia lapsed into silence. We were in a car, on our way to Melikhovo, Chekhov's country house, forty miles south of Moscow. Sonia began to converse in Russian with Vladimir, the driver, and continued to do so for many miles. In St. Petersburg, when Nelly spoke to our driver Sergei—usually to give him some direction—she did so tersely and apologetically. Sonia used her talk with the driver as a form of punishment. Finally, she turned to me, and said, "It is essential that you see the Armory—even for only forty-five minutes." "All right," I said. But Sonia was not satisfied. My attitude was so clearly wrong. "Tell me something," Sonia said. "When you were in St. Petersburg, did you go to the Hermitage?" "Yes," I said. "Well," Sonia said in a tone of triumph, "the Armory is much more important than the Hermitage."

When we arrived at Melikhovo, I recognized the house from pictures I had seen, but was surprised by the grounds, which were a disorderly spread of wild vegetation, haphazardly placed trees, and untended flower beds. There seemed to be no plan; the grounds made no sense as the setting for a house. Chekhov bought Melikhovo in the winter of 1892 and moved there with his parents, his sister, and his younger brothers in the spring. It was a small, rundown estate, which Chekhov rapidly transformed: the uncomfortable house was made snug and agreeable, kitchen and flower gardens were put in, an orchard was planted, a pond dug, the surrounding fields planted with rye and clover and oats. It was characteristic of Chekhov to make things work; thirteen years earlier, he had arrived in Moscow, to start medical school, and pulled his family out of poverty by what seems like sheer force of character. The father's store had failed, and he had fled to Moscow to escape debtor's prison. Alexander and Nikolai were already in Moscow studying at the university, and the mother and sister and younger brothers followed; but sixteen-year-old Anton was left behind in Taganrog to finish high school. Little is known about the three years Chekhov spent alone in Taganrog. He boarded with the man who had, like Lopakhin in "The Cherry Orchard," bailed out the family at a crucial moment for the price of their home. He was not a brilliant student, but he graduated and received a scholarship from the town for his further studies. He was a tall, robust boy, with a large head, a genial nature, and a gift for comedy. (He had entertained his family and now entertained his classmates with imitations and skits.)

When Chekhov rejoined his family in Moscow, in 1880, the possessor of what the critic James Wood has called a "strange, sourceless maturity," he quickly became its head. The authoritarian father, now a pitiable failure, had allowed the family to sink into disorderly destitution. The elder brothers made contributions—Alexander through writing sketches for humor magazines, and Nikolai through magazine illustrations—but they lived dissolute lives, and only when Anton, too, began writing humorous sketches did the family's fortunes change. He wrote strictly for money; if some other way of making money had come to hand, he would have taken it. The humor writing was wretchedly paid, but Chekhov wrote so quickly and easily and unceasingly that he was able to bring in considerable income. In the early writings, no hint of the author of "The Duel" and "The Lady with the Dog" is to be found. Most of the sketches were broadly humorous, like pieces in college humor magazines, and if some of them are less juvenile than others, and a few make one smile, none of them are distinguished. Chekhov began to show signs of becoming Chekhov only when he turned his hand to writing short fiction that wasn't funny. By 1886, his writing was attracting serious critical attention as well as bringing in real money. Because of Chekhov's earnings from his writings (he never made any money as a physician; he mostly treated peasants, free), the family was able to move to progressively better quarters in Moscow. The purchase of Melikhovo was a culminating product of Chekhov's literary success—and of the illusion (one that Russian writers, Chekhov included, are particularly good at mocking) that life in the country is a solution to the problem of living.

With his characteristic energy and dispatch, Chekhov organized his family so that there was a productive division of labor—the mother cooked, the sister took care of the kitchen garden, the youngest brother, Ivan, did the agriculture, and Anton took charge of horticulture, for which he proved to have great talent. (The father, who had been and remained a religious fanatic, would retreat to his room for his observances and the mixing of herbal remedies.) Chekhov came remarkably close to living out his pastoral ideal, and even passed the test that city people who moved to the country in nineteenth-century Russia invariably, ingloriously flunked—of being helpful to the peasants. Chekhov built three schools, donated his services as a doctor, and worked in famine and cholera relief—all the while writing some of his best stories and almost never being without a houseful of visitors. (His frequent, abrupt removals to Moscow or

St. Petersburg suggest that the problem of living remained.)

I recognized the house. Actually, however, I was seeing not the one in the photographs—which had been torn down in the nineteen-twenties—but a replica, built in the late forties. (Resurrecting destroyed buildings seems to be a national tic. In Moscow, I saw a huge church with gold domes which was a recently completed replica of one of the churches Stalin had wantonly torn down.) The interiors had been carefully restored, re-created from photographs supplied by Maria Chekhova, then in her eighties. The rooms were small and appealingly furnished; they gave a sense of a pleasant, very well-run home. The walls were covered with Morris-print-like wallpapers, and over them paintings and family photographs hung in dense arrangements. Everything was simple, handsome, unaffected. But I think that Chekhov would have found it absurd. The idea of rebuilding his house from scratch would have offended his sense of the fitness of things. I can imagine the look of irony on his face as he walked through the rooms—and listened to the prepared speech of our tour guide, Ludmilla. Ludmilla was a youngish woman with glasses, dressed in trousers and a shabby maroon snow jacket, who was full of knowledge of Chekhov's life but had read little of his work. She spoke of Chekhov with a radiant expression on her face. She told me (through Sonia) that a good deal of the furniture and many objects in the house were original; when the house was being torn down, the local peasants had sacked it but during the restoration returned much of what they had taken. I asked if they had been forced to do so by the Soviet authorities, and she said, "Oh, no. They did so gladly. Everyone loved Anton Pavlovich." When I questioned her about how she came to be working at the museum, she gave a long reply: She had never been able to read Chekhov; his writing left her cold. But one day she visited Melikhovo (she lived in a nearby town) and while in the house had some sort of incredible spiritual experience, which she cannot explain. She kept returning to Melikhovo—it drew her like a magnet—and finally the director of the museum had given her a job.

After finishing the tour of the ersatz house and the disorderly garden, Ludmilla walked out to the exit with Sonia and me, and from her answer to one of my questions it appeared that she wasn't paid for her work. "So you work here as a volunteer," I said. "No," she said. She just wasn't paid, the way many people in Russia were not being paid now. Wages were frequently "delayed" for months, even years. I asked Ludmilla how she lived if she wasn't paid. Did she have another job that did pay? Sonia—not relaying my question—looked at me angrily and said, "We will not talk about this. This is not your subject. We will talk about Chekhov."

I debated with myself whether to challenge Sonia, and decided I would. I said, "Look, if we're going to talk about Chekhov, we need to say that Anton Pavlovich cared about truth above all else. He did not look away from reality. People not being paid for work is something he would have talked about—not brushed away with 'Let's talk about Chekhov.' " I sounded a little ridiculous to myself—like someone doing an imitation of a character in a socialist-realist novel—but I enjoyed Sonia's discomposure, and when she started to answer I cut her off with "Tell Ludmilla what I just said." Sonia obeyed, and Ludmilla, smiling her sweet smile, said, "This is why I find it hard to read Chekhov. There is too much sadness in it. It is his spirituality that attracts me—the spirituality I receive from learning about his life."

On the drive back to Moscow, Sonia praised the "good taste" of Melikhovo, before relapsing into conversation with Vladimir. He was a large, swarthy man of around fifty, wearing a black leather coat and exuding a New York taxi-driver's gruff savoir-faire. The contrast between him and Sergei, my St. Petersburg driver, a slender young man who dressed in jeans and carried a book, was like the contrast between St. Petersburg and Moscow themselves. St. Petersburg was small and faded and elegant and a little unreal; Moscow was big and unlovely and the real thing in a city. St. Petersburg came at you sideways; Moscow immediately delivered the message of its scale and power. Chekhov loved Moscow and had reserved feelings about St. Petersburg, even though his literary career only got properly under way when, in 1882, the St. Petersburg editor and publisher A. N. Leiken invited him to write for his humorous weekly *Fragments* and then moved into full gear when he began writing for Suvorin's St. Petersburg newspaper *New Times*. He would visit St. Petersburg, first to see Leiken and then Suvorin, but he never really warmed to the city. In his fiction, people from St. Petersburg tend to be suspect (in "An Anonymous Story," an unsympathetic character named Orlov is described as a St. Petersburg dandy) or apologetic ("I was born in cold, idle Petersburg," the sympathetic Tuzenbach says in "The Three Sisters"). In St. Petersburg, Chekhov suffered the worst literary failure of his life, with "The Seagull"—comparable to Henry James's failure with "Guy Domville." At its première, at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in 1896, it was booed and jeered, and the reviews were savage. The failure is generally attributed to a special circumstance of the première: it was a benefit for a beloved comic actress named E. I. Levkeeva, and so the audience was largely made up of Levkeeva fans, who expected hilarity and, to their disbelief and growing outrage, got Symbolism. At its next performance, which was attended by a normal Petersburg audience, "The Seagull" was calmly and appreciatively received and positive criticism began to appear in the newspapers. But by that time Chekhov had crawled away to Melikhovo, and believed that he was finished as a playwright. "Never again will I write plays or have them staged," he wrote to Suvorin.

Because of Chekhov's slender and ambivalent ties to St. Petersburg, the city has no Chekhov museum, but a few of his letters and manuscripts have strayed into its Pushkin Museum, and on the morning of my first day in Nelly's charge she took me to inspect them. We sat at a table covered with dark-green cloth, opposite a young, round-faced archivist named Tatyana, who displayed each document like a jeweller displaying a costly necklace or brooch. (Once, when Nelly reached out her hand toward a document, Tatyana playfully slapped it.) Chekhov's small, spidery handwriting, very delicate and light, brought to mind Tolstoy's description of him as reported by Maxim Gorky: "What a dear, beautiful man; he is modest and quiet like a girl. And he walks like a girl." One of Tatyana's exhibits was a letter of 1887 to the writer Dmitri Grigorovich, commenting on a story of Grigorovich's called "Karelin's Dream." Today, Grigorovich's work is no longer read; his name figures in literary history largely because of a fan letter he wrote to Chekhov in March, 1886. At the time, Grigorovich was sixty-four and one of the major literary celebrities of the day. He wrote to tell the twenty-six-year-old Chekhov, "You have *real* talent—a talent which places you in the front rank among writers in the new generation." Grigorovich went on to counsel Chekhov to slow down, to stop writing so much, to save himself for large, serious literary effort. "Cease to write hurriedly. I do not know what your financial situation is. If it is poor, it would be better for you to go hungry, as we did in our day, and save your impressions for a mature, finished work, written not in one sitting but during the happy hours of inspiration."

Chekhov wrote back:

> Your letter, my kind, warmly beloved herald of glad tidings, struck me like a thunderbolt. I nearly wept, I was profoundly moved, and even now I feel that it has left a deep imprint on my soul. . . . I, indeed, can find neither words nor actions to show my gratitude. You know with what eyes ordinary people look upon such outstanding people like yourself, hence you may realize what your letter means for my self-esteem. . . . I am as in a daze. I lack the ability to judge whether or not I merit this great reward.

Chekhov went on to acknowledge the haste and carelessness with which he wrote:

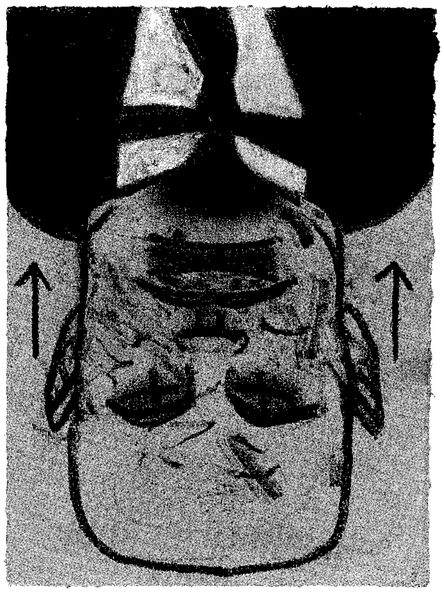
> I don't recall a single tale of mine over which I have worked more than a day, and "The Hunter," which pleased you, I wrote in the bathhouse! I have written my stories the way reporters write up their notes about fires—mechanically, half-consciously, caring nothing about either the reader or myself.

And:

> What first drove me to take a critical view of my writing was . . . a letter from Suvorin. I began to think of writing some purposeful piece, but nevertheless I did not have faith in my own literary direction.
>
> And now, all of a sudden, your letter arrived. You must forgive the comparison, but it had the same effect on me as a government order "to get out of the city in twenty-four hours." That is, I suddenly felt the need for

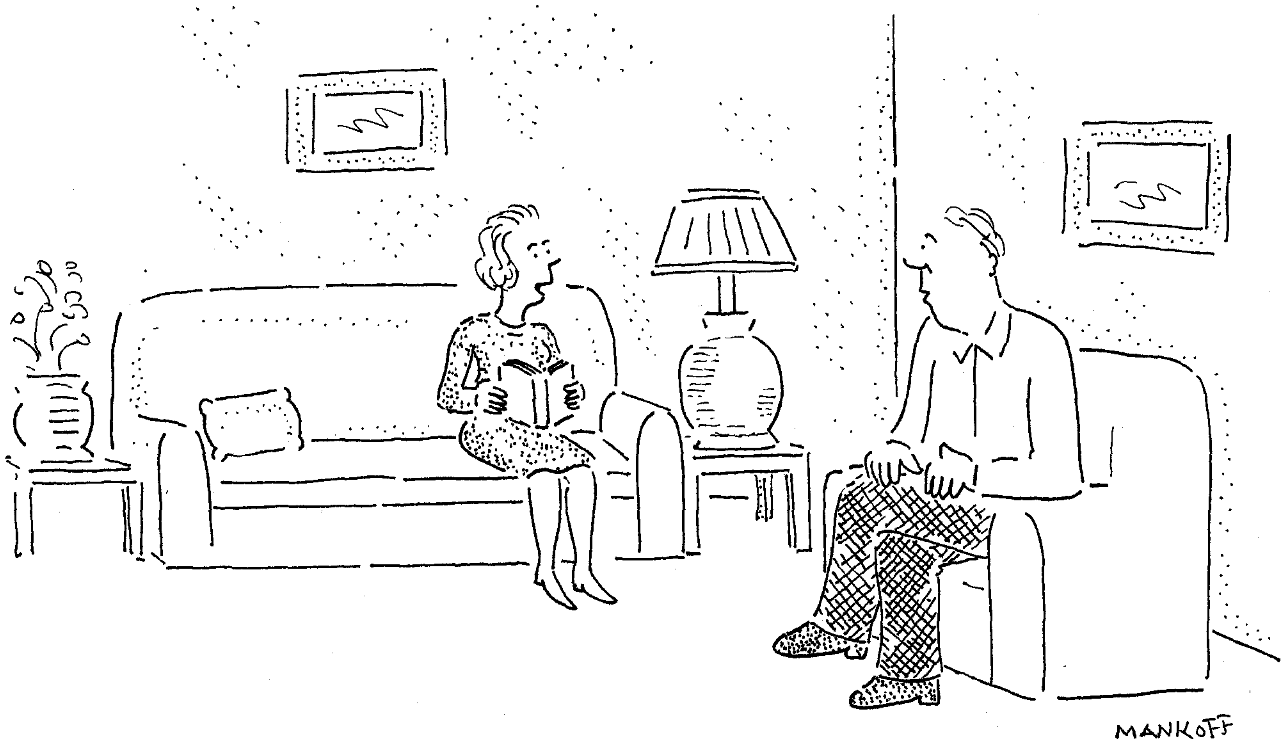
RICHARD MERKIN

TAKES



Although many Romans—and quite a few American correspondents—deplore what went on in the Piazza Loreto on the morning of Sunday, the twenty-ninth, to the Milanese these events will probably always be symbols of the north's liberation. To an outsider like myself, who happened to be on hand to see Mussolini, Clara Petacci, Pavolini, Starace, and some of the other Fascists dangling by their heels from a rusty beam in front of a gas station, the breathless, bloody scene had an air of inevitability. You had the feeling, as you have at the final curtain of a good play, that events could not have been otherwise. In many people's minds, I think, the embellishments of this upheaval—thousands of Partisans firing their machine guns into the air, Fascist bodies lying in a heap alongside the gas station, the enormous, pressing crowd—have been overemphasized and its essential dignity and purpose have been overlooked. This is best illustrated by the execution of Starace—the fanatical killer who was once secretary of the Fascist Party—who was brought into the square in an open truck at about ten-thirty in the morning. The bodies of Mussolini and the others had been hanging for several hours. I had reached the square just before the truck arrived. As it moved slowly ahead, the crowd fell back and became silent. Surrounded by armed guards, Starace stood in the middle of the truck, hands in the air, a lithe, square-jawed, surly figure in a black shirt. The truck stopped for an instant close to the grotesque corpse of his old boss. Starace took one look and started to fall forward, perhaps in a faint, but was pushed back to a standing position by his guards. The truck drove ahead a few feet and stopped. Starace was taken out and placed near a white wall at the rear of the gas station. Beside him were baskets of spring flowers—pink, yellow, purple, and blue—placed there in honor of fifteen anti-Facists who had been murdered in the same square six months before. A firing squad of Partisans shot Starace in the back, and another Partisan, perched on a beam some twenty feet above the ground, turned toward the crowd in the square and made a broad gesture of finality, much like a highly dramatic umpire calling a man out at the home plate. There were no roars or bloodcurdling yells; there was only silence, and then, suddenly, a sigh—a deep, moaning sound, seemingly expressive of release from something dark and fetid. The people in the square seemed to understand that this was a moment of both ending and beginning. Two minutes later, Starace had been strung up alongside Mussolini and the others. "Look at them now," an old man beside me kept saying. "Just look at them now."

—Philip Hamburger
Letter from Rome, May 19, 1945



"I'm sorry, dear. I wasn't listening. Could you repeat what you've said since we've been married?"

• •

haste, to get out of this rut, where I am stuck, as quickly as possible.

In his letter about "Karelin's Dream," Chekhov gives a remarkable account of the way being cold at night gets into one's dreams:

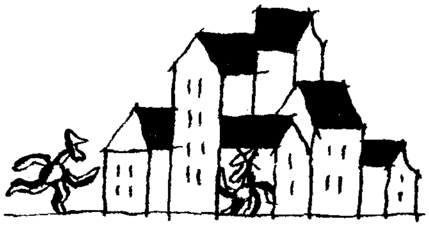
> When at night the quilt falls off I begin to dream of huge slippery stones, of cold autumnal water, naked banks—and all this dim, misty, without a patch of blue sky; sad and dejected like one who has lost his way, I look at the stones and feel that for some reason I cannot avoid crossing a deep river; I see then small tugs that drag huge barges, floating beams. . . . All this is infinitely gray, damp, and dismal. When I run from the river I come across the fallen cemetery gates, funerals, my school teachers. . . . And all the time I am cold through and through with that oppressive nightmare-like cold which is impossible in waking life, and which is only felt by those who are asleep. . . .When I feel cold I always dream of my teacher of scripture, a learned priest of imposing appearance, who insulted my mother when I was a little boy; I dream of vindictive, implacable, intriguing people, smiling with spiteful glee—such as one can never see in waking life. The laughter at the carriage window is a characteristic symptom of Karelin's nightmare. When in dreams one feels the presence of some evil will, the inevitable ruin brought about by some outside force, one aways hears something like such laughter.

These dreams, in their atmosphere of dread and uncanniness, put one in mind of the novels of Dostoyevsky and the paintings of Edvard Munch, and hint at anxieties of which Chekhov preferred never to speak. Chekhov's biographers regularly note his elusive reserve, even as they attempt to break it down. With the opening of the Soviet archives, hitherto unknown details of Chekhov's love life and sex life have emerged. But the value of this new information—much of it derived from passages or phrases cut out of Chekhov's published letters by the puritanical Soviet censorship, and absurdly said to make him "more human"—is questionable. That Chekhov was not uninterested in or prudish about sex is hardly revealed by his use of a coarse word in a letter; it is implicit in the stories and plays. Chekhov would be unperturbed, and probably even amused, by the stir the restored cuts have created—as if the documentary proof of sexual escapades or of incidents of impotence disclosed anything essential about him, anything that crosses the boundary between his inner and outer life. Chekhov's privacy is safe from the biographer's attempts upon it—as, indeed, are all privacies, even those of the most apparently open and even exhibitionistic natures. The letters and journals we leave behind and the impressions we have made on our contemporaries are the mere husk of the kernel of our essential life. When we die, the kernel is buried with us. This is the horror and pity of death and the reason for the inescapable triviality of biography.

The attentive reader of Chekhov will notice a piece of plagiarism I have just committed. The image of the kernel and the husk comes from another famous passage in "The Lady with the Dog," one that appears in its last section. Gurov, as you will recall, after parting with Anna at the end of the summer and returning to his loveless marriage in Moscow, found that he couldn't get her out of his mind, travelled to the provincial town where she lived with the husband *she* didn't love, and is now clandestinely meeting with her in a hotel in Moscow, to which she comes every month or so, telling her husband she is seeing a specialist. One snowy morning, on his way to the hotel, Gurov reflects on his situation (all the while conversing with his daughter, whom he will drop off at school before proceeding to his tryst):

> He had two lives: one, open, seen and known by all who cared to know, full of relative truth and of relative falsehood, exactly like the lives of his friends and acquaintances; and another life running its course in secret. And through some strange, perhaps accidental, conjunction of circumstances, everything that was essential, of interest and of value to him, everything in which he was sincere and did not deceive himself, everything that made the kernel of his life, was hidden from other people; and all that was false in him, the sheath in which he hid himself to conceal the truth—such, for instance, as his work in the bank, his discussions at the club. . . his presence with his wife at anniversary festivities—all that was open. And he judged of others by himself, not believing in what he saw, and always believing that every man had his real, most interesting life under the cover of secrecy and under the cover of night. All personal life rested on secrecy, and possibly it was partly on that account that civilized man was so nervously anxious that personal privacy should be respected.

"The Lady with the Dog" is said to be Chekhov's riposte to "Anna Karenina," his defense of illicit love against Tolstoy's harsh (if ambivalent) condemnation of it. But Chekhov's "Anna" (if this is what it is) bears no real resemblance to Tolstoy's; comparing the two only draws attention to the differences between Chekhov's realism and Tolstoy's. Gurov is no Vronsky, and Anna Von Diderits is no Anna Karenina. Neither of the Chekhov characters has the particularity, the vivid lifelikeness of the Tolstoy lovers. They are rather indistinct, more like figures in an allegory than like characters in a novel. Nor is Chekhov concerned, as Tolstoy is, with adultery as a social phenomenon. In "Anna Karenina," the lovers occupy only a section of a crowded canvas; in "The Lady with the Dog," the lovers fill the canvas. Other people appear in the story—the crowd at the Yalta harbor, a Moscow official with whom Gurov plays cards, the daughter he walks to school, a couple of servants—but they are shadowy figures, without names. (Even the dog is unnamed—when Gurov arrives at Anna's house, and sees a servant walking it, Chekhov makes a point of noting that "in his excitement he could not remember the dog's name.") The story has a close, hermetic atmosphere. No one knows of the affair, or suspects its existence. It is as if it were taking place in a sealed box made of dark glass from which the lovers can see out but no one can see in. The story enacts what the passage about Gurov's double life states. It can be read as an allegory of interiority. The beauty of Gurov and Anna's secret love—and of interior life—is precisely its hiddenness. Chekhov often said that he hated lies more than anything. "The Lady with the Dog" plays with the paradox that a lie—a husband deceiving a wife or a wife deceiving a husband—can be the fulcrum of truth of feeling, a vehicle of authenticity. (Tolstoy would argue that this is the kind of self-deception adulterers classically indulge in, and that a lie is a lie.) But the story's most interesting and complicated paradox lies in the inversion of the inner/outer formula by which imaginative literature is perforce propelled. Even as Gurov hugs his secret to himself, we know all about it. If privacy is life's most precious possession, it is fiction's least considered one. A fictional character is a being who has no privacy, and who stands before the reader with his "real, most interesting life" nakedly exposed. We never see people in life as clearly as we see the people in novels, stories, and plays; there is a veil between ourselves and even our closest intimates, blurring us to each other. By intimacy we mean something much more modest than the glaring exposure to which the souls of fictional characters are regularly held up. We know things about Gurov and Anna—especially about Gurov, since the story is told from his point of view—that they don't know about each other, and feel no discomfort in our voyeurism. We consider it our due as readers. It does not occur to us that the privacy rights we are so nervously anxious to safeguard for ourselves should be extended to fictional characters. But, interestingly, it does seem to occur to Chekhov. If he cannot draw the mantle of reticence over his characters that he draws over himself—and still call himself a fiction writer—he can stop short of fully exercising his fiction writer's privilege of omniscience. He can hold back, he can leave his characters a little obscured, their motives a little mysterious. It is this reticence that Shcheglov and Suvorin were responding to in their criticism of "Lights." Chekhov's replies, with their appealing expressions of epistemological humility and journalistic detachment, skirt the issue, putting his interlocutors off the scent of his characters' secrets.



In a story called "Difficult People," written in 1886, we can see the shoot from which Gurov's meditation on double life will grow. A dreadful row has taken place at a provincial family dinner table between an authoritarian father and a rebellious son. The son storms out of the house and, full of bitterness and hatred, sets off for Moscow on foot. Then:

> "Look out!" He heard behind him a loud voice.
>
> An old lady of his acquaintance, a landowner of the neighborhood, drove past him in a light, elegant landau. He bowed to her, and smiled all over his face. And at once he caught himself in that smile, which was so out of keeping with his gloomy mood. Where did it come from if his whole heart was full of vexation and misery. And he thought nature itself had given man this capacity for lying, that even in difficult moments of spiritual strain he might be able to hide the secrets of his nest as the fox and the wild duck do. Every family has its joys and its horrors, but however great they may be, it's hard for an outsider's eye to see them; they are a secret.

Chekhov hid the secrets of his literary nest as well as those of his personal one; he was closemouthed about his compositional methods and destroyed most of his drafts. But he didn't merely withhold information about his literary practice; the practice itself was a kind of exercise in withholding. In his letter of 1886 to Grigorovich, Chekhov noted his curious habit of doing everything he could not to "waste" on any story "the images and scenes dear to me which—God knows why—I have treasured and kept carefully hidden," and, writing to Suvorin in October, 1888, he again cited "the images which seem best to me, which I love and jealously guard, lest I spend and spoil them," adding, "All that I now write displeases and bores me, but what sits in my head interests, excites and moves me."

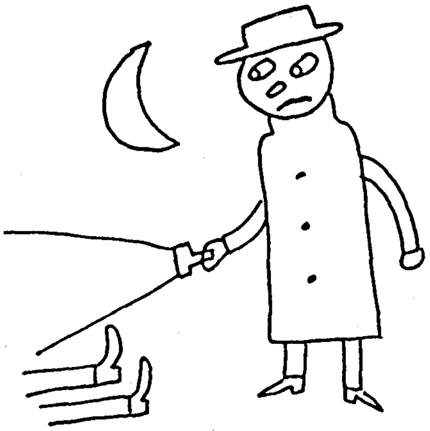
In the much anthologized story "The Kiss" (1887), Chekhov gave brilliant form to his sense of the danger of dislodging what sits in one's head from its place of safety. A brigade on the march spends the night in a provincial town, and its nineteen officers are invited for evening tea at the house of the local squire, a retired lieutenant general named Von Rabbek. The central consciousness of the story is Ryabovitch, "a little officer in spectacles, with sloping shoulders, and whiskers like a lynx's," who thinks of himself as "the shyest, most modest, and most undistinguished officer in the whole brigade." At Von Rabbek's house, Ryabovitch is struck by the social adroitness of the host and hostess and their grown son and daughter, who have invited the officers strictly out of duty, and at a time when it is inconvenient to do so—they are having a houseparty—but who put on a dazzling performance of hospitality. "Von Rabbek and this family skillfully drew the officers into the discussion, and meanwhile kept a sharp lookout over their glasses and mouths, to see whether all of them were drinking, whether all had enough sugar, why some one was not eating cakes or not drinking brandy. And the longer Ryabovitch watched and listened, the more he was attracted by this insincere but splendidly disciplined family." During a period of dancing, in which Ryabovitch does not participate ("He had never once danced in his whole life, and he had never once in his life put his arm round the waist of a respectable woman"), he follows the Von Rabbek son and some officers to a billiard room in another part of the house, and then, feeling himself in the way (he does not play billiards, either), decides to return to the drawing room. But in retracing his steps Ryabovitch makes a wrong turn and finds himself in a small dark room. Suddenly, a young woman rushes toward him, murmurs "At last!" and kisses him. Realizing her mistake—she had come to the room for a lovers' tryst, clearly—she shrieks and runs off. The encounter has a momentous effect on Ryabovitch. It is almost like a conversion experience:

> Something strange was happening to him. . . . His neck, round which soft, fragrant arms had so lately been clasped, seemed to him to be anointed with oil; on his left cheek near his moustache where the unknown had kissed him there was a faint chilly tingling sensation, as from peppermint drops. . . . He was full of a strange new feeling which grew stronger and stronger. . . . He quite forgot that he was round-shouldered and uninteresting, that he had lynx-like whiskers and an "undistinguished appearance." (That was how his appearance had been described by some ladies whose conversation he had accidentally overheard.)

The next morning, the brigade leaves the town, and throughout the day's march Ryabovitch remains under the spell of the kiss, which has acted on his imagination like a powerful drug, releasing delicious fantasies of romantic love. At the end of the day, in the tent after supper, he feels the need to tell his comrades about his adventure:

> He began describing very minutely the incident of the kiss, and a moment later relapsed into silence. . . . In the course of that moment he had told everything, and it surprised him dreadfully to find how short a time it took him to tell it. He had imagined that he could have been telling the story of the kiss till next morning.

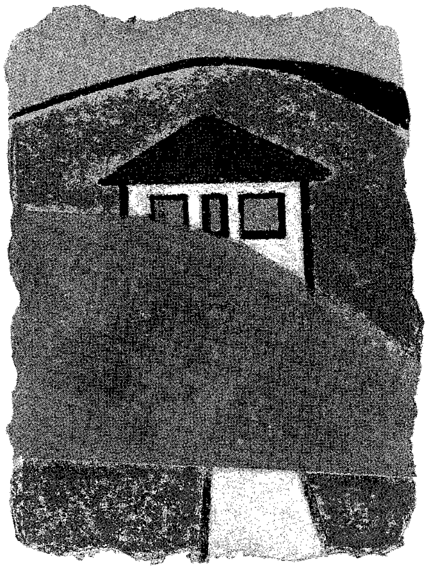
One of the officers, a sleazy womanizer named Lobytko, is moved to respond with a crude story about a sexual encounter in a train. Ryabovitch vows "never to confide again." Twelve years later, Chekhov will write another version of this scene, in "The Lady with the Dog." After Gurov returns home from Yalta, he is "tormented by an intense desire to confide his memories to some one," and one evening, as he is leaving a Moscow club, he impulsively says to an official with whom he has been playing cards:



RICHARD MERKIN

> "If only you knew what a fascinating woman I made the acquaintance of in Yalta!"
> The official got into his sledge and was driving away, but turned suddenly and shouted:
> "Dmitri Dmitrich!"
> "What?"
> "You were right this evening: the sturgeon was a bit too strong!"

In both cases, something lovely and precious has been defiled by the vulgar gaze of the outer world. Both men immediately regret their impulse to confide. But the telling scene in "The Kiss" has an additional moral—a literary one. Ryabovitch makes the painful discovery that every novice writer makes about the gap that lies between thinking and writing. ("It surprised him dreadfully to find how short a time it took him to tell it.") The gossamer images that sit in one's head have to be transformed into some more durable material—that of artful narration—if they are not to dissolve into nothing when they hit the chilly outer air. Chekhov lodges the cautionary incident of Ryabovitch's artless blurting out within his own artful narration. What poor Ryabovitch fails to communicate to his comrades in his amateur's innocence Chekhov succeeds in communicating to us with his professional's guile. He is like the practiced Von Rabbeks, who perform their function of giving pleasure because they must and because they know how. "You can do nothing by wisdom and holiness if God has not given you the gift," a monk in "On Easter Eve" (1886) says in a discussion of the poetics of certain hymns of praise in the Russian Orthodox liturgy called *akathistoi*. "Everything must be harmonious, brief, and complete. . . . Every line must be beautified in every way; there must be flowers and lightning and wind and sun and all the objects of the visible world." Chekhov's own literary enterprise could hardly be better described. His stories and plays—even the darkest among them—are hymns of praise. Flowers and lightning and wind and sun and all the objects of the visible world appear in them as they appear in the work of no other writer. In almost every Chekhov work there is a moment when we suddenly feel as Ryabovitch felt when the young woman entered the room and kissed him. ♦



In geology, it would be known as a debris flow. Debris flows amass in stream valleys and more or less resemble fresh concrete. They consist of water mixed with a good deal of solid material, most of which is above sand size. Some of it is Chevrolet size. Boulders bigger than cars ride long distances in debris flows. Boulders grouped like fish eggs pour downhill in debris flows. The dark material coming toward the Genofiles was not only full of boulders; it was so full of automobiles it was like bread dough mixed with raisins. On its way down Pine Cone Road, it plucked up cars from driveways and the street. When it crashed into the Genofiles' house, the shattering of safety glass made terrific explosive sounds. A door burst open. Mud and boulders poured into the hall. We're going to go, Jackie thought. Oh, my God, what a hell of a way for the four of us to die together.

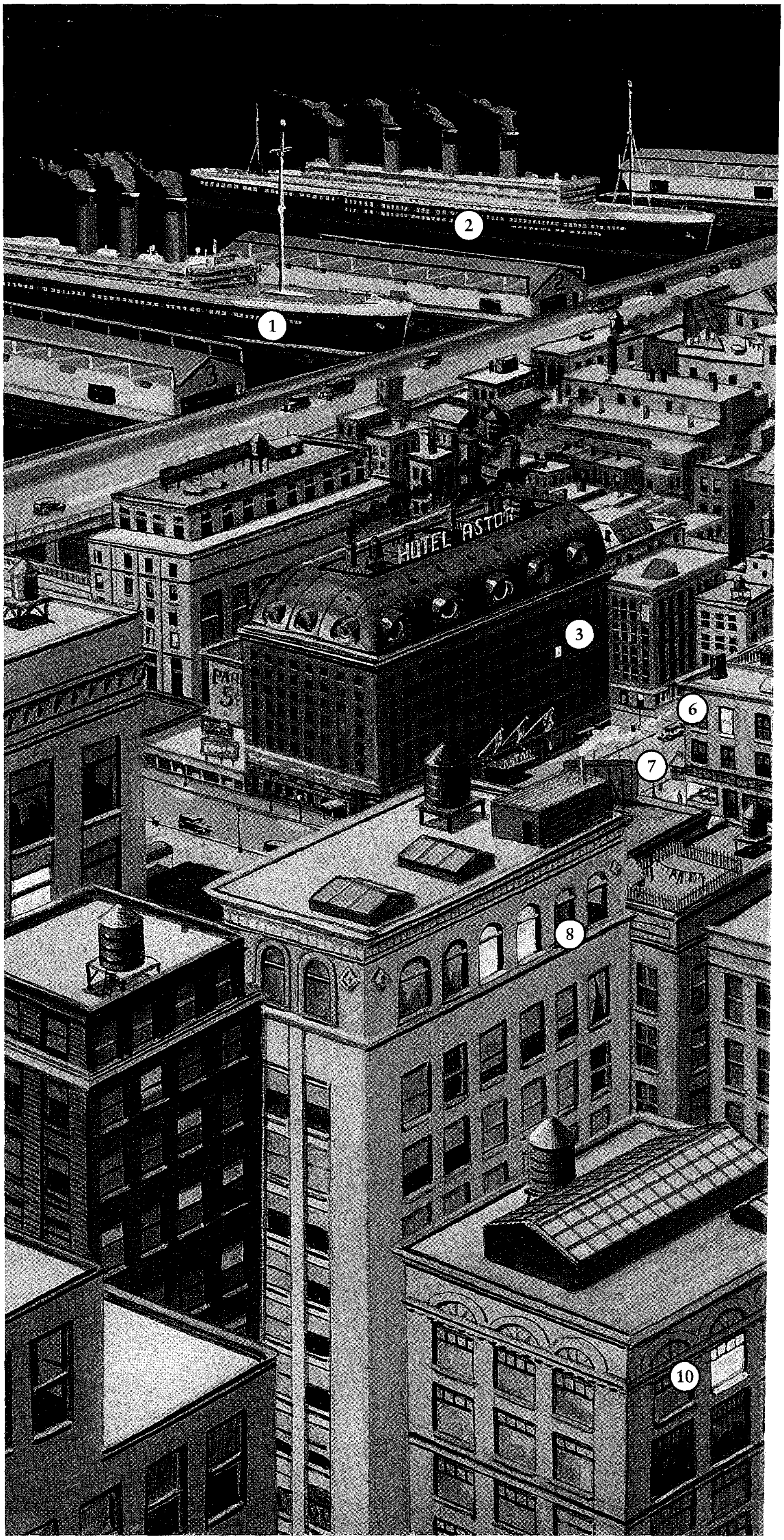
The parents' bedroom was on the far side of the house. Bob Genofile was in there kicking through white satin draperies at the panelled glass, smashing it to provide an outlet for water, when the three others ran in to join him. The walls of the house neither moved nor shook. As a general contractor, Bob had built dams, department stores, hospitals, six schools, seven churches, and this house. It was made of concrete block with steel reinforcement, sixteen inches on center. His wife had said it was stronger than any dam in California. His crew had called it "the fort." In those days, twenty years before, the Genofiles' acre was close by the edge of the mountain brush, but a developer had come along since then and knocked down thousands of trees and put Pine Cone Road up the slope. Now Bob Genofile was thinking, I hope the roof holds. I hope the roof is strong enough to hold. Debris was flowing over it. He told Scott to shut the bedroom door. No sooner was the door closed than it was battered down and fell into the room. Mud, rock, water poured in. It pushed everybody against the far wall. "Jump on the bed," Bob said. The bed began to rise. Kneeling on it—on a gold velvet spread—they could soon press their palms against the ceiling. The bed also moved toward the glass wall. The two teen-agers got off, to try to control the motion, and were pinned between the bed's brass railing and the wall. Boulders went up against the railing, pressed it into their legs, and held them fast. Bob dived into the muck to try to move the boulders, but he failed. The debris flow, entering through windows as well as doors, continued to rise. Escape was still possible for the parents but not for the children. The parents looked at each other and did not stir. Each reached for and held one of the children. Their mother felt suddenly resigned, sure that her son and daughter would die and she and her husband would quickly follow. The house became buried to the eaves. Boulders sat on the roof. Thirteen automobiles were packed around the building, including five in the pool. A din of rocks kept banging against them. The stuck horn of a buried car was blaring. The family in the darkness in their fixed tableau watched one another by the light of a directional signal, endlessly blinking. The house had filled up in six minutes, and the mud stopped rising near the children's chins.

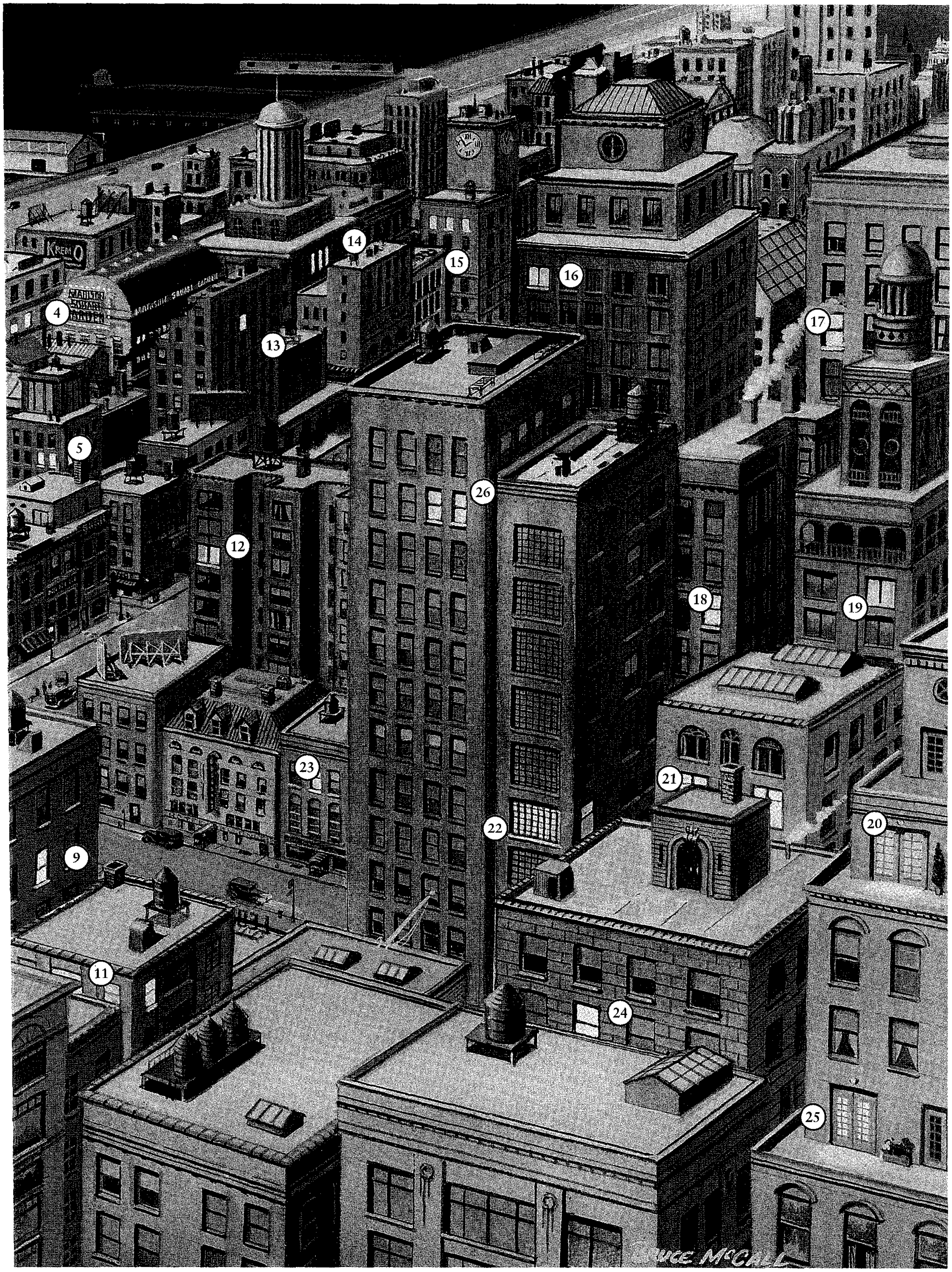
—John McPhee
"Los Angeles Against the Mountains"
(The Control of Nature),
September 26, 1988

EASEL BY BRUCE McCALL

MIDTOWN
FEB. 13, 1925
11 P.M.

1. Third-class passenger Josephine Baker embarks for Cherbourg.
2. Demanding a larger stateroom, passenger Wallis Warfield embarks for Southampton.
3. Seven-year-old John F. Kennedy spies father, Joe Kennedy, smooching with Gloria Swanson.
4. Dutch Schultz threatens Legs Diamond in back room of Jimmy Walker's favorite speakeasy.
5. Sinclair Lewis punches out Theodore Dreiser in Edmund Wilson's living room.
6. James Thurber is asked to leave the Robert Benchleys' after drawing on the bathroom wall.
7. Edward Hopper hits on the subject of his next painting.
8. Georgia O'Keeffe two-times Alfred Stieglitz with Man Ray.
9. Lee De Forest sits in the living room watching Mrs. De Forest do the dishes in the kitchen in the first sound-on-film screening.
10. Filing his fiftieth Broadway gossip column, Walter Winchell blasts "high-hat British snobs like Duke Ellington."
11. Ernest Hemingway belts Zelda Fitzgerald after losing an arm-wrestling match with Jackie Coogan at Michael Arlen's.
12. John Barrymore takes a swing at brother Lionel as sister Ethel and the Lunts try to intervene.
13. Dorothy Parker freshens up her drink.
14. Theda Bara attends the world première of "The Gold Rush" and misses the Eleonora Duse memorial service.
15. George S. Kaufman meets Moss Hart when their taxis collide, injuring pedestrian Winston Churchill.
16. A correction in tomorrow's *Times* confirms that Sherwood and Maxwell Anderson are not brothers.
17. Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover is heckled during his speech at the annual New York Stock Exchange dinner by a man identified as "F. D. Roosenfeld."
18. John O'Hara crumples up a letter from the *Smart Set* rejecting all sixteen short stories submitted.
19. Algonquin Round Table consigliere Alexander Woollcott blackballs the membership application of President Coolidge.
20. Houseguest Noël Coward suggests that Cole Porter change the title of his new song from "Rank and File" to "Night and Day."
21. Nine-year-old Orson Welles stars in his production of "The Tempest" in the family living room.
22. Jack Dempsey knocks out Tunney, Firpo, and Sharkey.
23. Queen Marie of Romania skips out on her hotel bill.
24. Fred and Adele Astaire celebrate their graduation from the New York Academy of Hoofing by dining with Jimmy Cagney.
25. George Gershwin ducks the opening performance of "Ziegfeld Follies" to rehearse "Rhapsody in Blue" for tomorrow night's Aeolian Hall concert.
26. Harold Ross puts the first issue of *The New Yorker* to bed.

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FICTION

NETTLES

BY ALICE MUNRO

In the summer of 1979, I walked into the kitchen of my friend Sunny's house near Uxbridge, Ontario, and saw a man standing at the counter, making himself a ketchup sandwich.

Years afterward, driving around in the hills northeast of Toronto with another man, I looked for the house. I tried to locate the road it was on, but I never succeeded. It had probably been torn down. Sunny and her husband sold it, a few years after I visited them. It was too far from Ottawa, where they lived, to serve as a convenient summer place. Their children, as they became teen-agers, balked at going there. And there was too much upkeep work for Johnston—Sunny's husband—who liked to spend his weekends golfing.

I found the golf course—I think it was the right one, though the ragged verges have been cleaned up and there is a fancier clubhouse.

In the countryside where I lived as a child, wells would occasionally go dry in the summer. Our well was deeper than most, but we needed a good supply of water for our penned animals—my father raised silver foxes and mink—so one day the well-driller arrived with impressive equipment and began the work of extending the hole down, down, deep into the earth until the water was found in the rock. From that time on we could pump out pure cold water no matter what the time of year and no matter how dry the weather. There was a tin mug hanging on the pump, and when I drank from it, on a burning day, I thought of black rocks where the water ran sparkling like black diamonds.

The well-driller was a man named Mike McCallum. He lived in the Clark Hotel, in the town close to our farm. He had come there in the spring and he would stay until he finished up whatever work he found to do in this part of the country. Then he would move on.

Mike McCallum had a son who lived with him in hotel rooms or boarding houses, wherever he was working, and who went to whatever school was at hand. His name was Mike McCallum, too. He was nine and I was eight. His birthday was in April, mine in June. The summer holidays were well under way when he arrived at our house with his father.

His father drove a dark-red truck that was always muddy or dusty. Mike and I climbed into the cab when it rained, and the rain washed down the windows and made a racket like stones on the roof. The smell was of men—their work clothes and tools and tobacco and mucky boots and sour-cheese socks. Also of damp longhaired dog, because we took my dog, Ranger, in with us. Living as he did with his father, Mike could never have a dog of his own, and he was fond of ours. One day when Ranger was with us he chased a skunk, and the skunk turned and sprayed him. My mother had to stop whatever she was doing and drive into town and get several large tins of tomato juice, and Mike persuaded Ranger to get into a tub and we poured the tomato juice over him and brushed it into his hair. It looked as if we were washing him in blood.

I had more acquaintance with blood than Mike did. I took him to see the spot in the corner of the pasture near the barnyard gate, where my father shot and butchered the horses that were fed to the foxes and mink. The ground was trodden bare and appeared to have a deep bloodstain, an iron-red cast to it. Then I took him to the meat house in the barnyard, where the horse carcasses were hung before being ground up for feed. The meat house was just a shed with wire walls, and the walls were black with flies, drunk on the smell of carrion. We got shingles and smashed them dead.

Our farm was small—nine acres. It was small enough for me to have explored every part of it. Each of the trees on the place had an attitude and a presence—the elm looked serene and the oak threatening, the maples friendly and workaday, the hawthorn old and crabby. Even the pits on the river flats—where my father had sold off gravel years ago—had their distinct character.

The river in August was almost as much a stony road as it was a watercourse. Mike and I took off our shoes and waded—jumping from one bare, bone-white rock to another, slipping on the scummy rocks below the surface, and plowing through mats of flat-leafed water lilies, trapping our legs in their snaky roots. This river was the same one that ran publicly through the town, and walking upstream one day we came in sight of the double-span highway bridge. When I was by myself or just with Ranger, I would never go as far as the bridge, because there were usually town people there. They came to fish over the side, and when the water was high enough boys jumped from the railing. They wouldn't be doing that now, but it was more than likely that some of them would be splashing around down below, loudmouthed and hostile as town children always were, maybe retrieving bottles that people had flung over.

Tramps were another possibility. But I said nothing of this to Mike, who went ahead of me as if the bridge were an ordinary destination and there was nothing unpleasant or forbidden about it. Voices reached us, and, as I expected, they were the voices of boys yelling. The floor of the bridge was our roof, with streaks of sunlight showing between the planks. And now a car passed over, with a sound of thunder and a blotting out of the light. We stood still for this event, looking up. Mike yelled to test the echo, and I did the same, but faintly, because the boys on the shore, on the other side of the bridge, scared me.

I went to the country school beyond our farm, but Mike had been going to

PETER BROWN, "FAYETTEVILLE, 1998"/HARRIS GALLERY, HOUSTON

the town school since spring and these boys were not strangers to him. He would probably have been playing with them, and not with me, if his father had not had the idea of taking him along on his jobs, so that he could, however intermittently, keep an eye on him. There must have been some words of greeting passed between these town boys and Mike.

Hey. What do you think you're doing here?

Nothing. What do you think you're doing?

Nothing. Who's that you got with you?

Nobody. Just her.

Nyaah-nyaah. Just her.

There were girls farther up on the bank. They might have followed the boys out from town—pretending not to follow—or the boys might have come along after them, intending some harassment, but somehow when they had all got together this game had taken shape. It was a game of war. The boys had divided themselves into two armies that fought each other from behind barricades made of tree branches and the bulrushes and water weeds that were higher than our heads. The chief weapons were balls of clay, mud balls, about the size of baseballs. You squeezed and patted the sticky clay into as hard a ball as you could make—there could be some gravel in it and binding material of grass, leaves, bits of twigs, but no stones—and there had to be a great many of these balls, because they were good for only one throw.

The girls as well as the boys were divided into two sides. Each girl had her own pile of balls and was working for particular soldiers, and when a soldier fell wounded he would call out a girl's name, so that she could drag him away and dress his wounds as quickly as possible. I made weapons for Mike, and mine was the name he called. There was so much noise going on that you had to stay alert to hear your name. There was a keen alarm when the cry came, a wire zinging through your whole body, a fanatic feeling of devotion. When Mike was wounded he never opened his eyes. He lay limp and still while I pressed slimy large leaves to his forehead and throat and—pulling out his shirt—to his pale tender stomach, with its sweet and vulnerable belly button.

Nobody won. The game disintegrated, after a long while, in arguments and mass resurrections. We tried to get some of the clay off us, on the way home, by lying down flat in the river water. Our shorts and shirts were filthy and dripping.

It was late in the afternoon. Mike's father was getting ready to leave.

"For Christ's sake," he said.

Our part-time hired man was there in the yard, helping Mike's father. He had an elderly, boyish look and a wheezing asthmatic way of breathing. He liked to grab me and tickle me until I thought I would suffocate. Nobody interfered with this. My mother didn't like it, but my father told her it was only a joke.

"You two been rolling in the mud," he said. "First thing you know you gonna have to get married."

From behind the screen door my mother heard that. She came out and said something to the hired man, in a low, reproving voice, before she said anything about the way we looked. I heard part of what she said.

Like brother and sister.

The hired man looked at his boots, grinning helplessly.

I knew that the hired man was talking about sex, though I don't think I knew the word. And I hated him for that even more than I usually hated him. But he was closer to the truth than she was. Mike and I did not go in for any showings or rubbings or guilty intimacies—there was none of that twiddling pleasure and frustration and immediate, raw shame. Such scenes had taken place for me with a boy cousin and with a couple of slightly older girls, sisters, who went to my school. I disliked these partners before and after the event and would angrily deny, even in my own mind, that any of these things had happened. Escapades like these could never have been considered with anybody for whom I felt any fondness or respect—only with people who disgusted me, as those randy, abhorrent itches made me disgusted with myself.

In my feelings for Mike that localized demon was transformed into a diffuse excitement and tenderness, spread everywhere under the skin, a pleasure of the eyes and ears and a tingling contentment in the presence of the other person. I woke up every morning hungry for the sight of him, for the sound of the well-driller's truck as it came bumping and rattling down the lane. I worshipped, without any show of it, the back of his neck and the shape of his head, the frown of his eyebrows, his long bare toes and his dirty elbows, his loud and confident voice, his smell. I accepted readily, even devoutly, the roles that did not have to be explained or worked out between us—that I would aid and admire him, that he would direct and stand ready to protect me.

One morning, of course, the job was all finished, the well capped, the pump reinstated, the fresh water marvelled at. And the truck did not come. There were two fewer chairs at the table for the noon meal. Mike and I had barely looked at each other during those meals. He liked to put ketchup on his bread. His father talked to my father, and the talk was mostly about wells, accidents, water tables. A serious man. All work, my father said. Yet he—Mike's father—ended nearly every speech with a laugh. The laugh had a lonely boom in it, as if he were still down the well.

It turned out that this job was the last one that the well-driller had to do in our part of the country. He had other jobs lined up elsewhere, and he wanted to get to them as soon as he could, while the good weather lasted. Living as he did, in the hotel, he could just pack up and be gone. And that was what he had done. I must have known that Mike would be leaving. Just as I knew that Ranger was old and that he would soon die. Future absence I accepted—it was just that I had no idea, until Mike disappeared, of what absence could be like. How all my own territory would be altered, as if a landslide had gone through it and skimmed off all meaning except loss of Mike.

One day weeks afterward, I was standing by the door of the shoe store while my mother tried on shoes, and I heard a woman running past the store call, "Mike!" I was suddenly convinced that this woman, whom I did not know, must be Mike's mother. (I knew, though not from him, that she was separated from his father, not dead.) I was now running out of the store—thinking only that in another minute I would see him.

The woman had caught up with a boy about five years old, who had just helped himself to an apple, out of a bushel of apples that was standing on the

TAKES

Travolta—twenty-seven now—finally has a role that allows him to discard his teen-age strutting and his slobby accents. Now it seems clear that he was so slack-jawed and weak in last year's "Urban Cowboy" because he couldn't draw upon his own emotional experience—the ignorant-kid role was conceived so callowly that it emasculated him as an actor. As Jack [in "Blow Out"], he seems taller and lankier. He has a moment in the flashback about his police work when he sees the officer hanging by the wire. He cries out, takes a few steps away, and then turns and looks again. He barely does anything—yet it's the kind of screen acting that made generations of filmgoers revere Brando in "On the Waterfront": it's the willingness to go emotionally naked and the control to do it in character. (And, along with that, the understanding of desolation.) Travolta's body is always in character in this movie; when Jack is alone and intent on what he's doing, we feel his commitment to the orderly world of neatly labelled tapes—his hands are precise and graceful. Recording the wind in the trees just before the crash of the governor's car, Jack points his long, thin mike as if he were a conductor with a baton calling forth the sounds of the night; when he first listens to the tape, he waves a pencil in the direction from which each sound came. You can believe that Jack is dedicated to his craft, because Travolta is a listener. His face lights up when he hears Sally's little-girl cooing; his face closes when he hears the complaints of his boss, Sam (Peter Boyden), who makes sleazo "blood" films—he rejects the sound.

At the end, Jack's feelings of grief and loss suggest that he has learned the limits of technology; it's like coming out of the cocoon of adolescence. "Blow Out" is the first movie in which De Palma has stripped away the cackle and the glee; this time he's not inviting you to laugh along with him. He's playing it straight, and asking you—trusting you—to respond. In "The Fury," he tried to draw you into the characters' emotions by a fantasy framework; in "Blow Out," he locates the fantasy material inside the characters' heads. There was true vitality in the hyperbolic, teasing perversity of his previous movies, but this one is emotionally richer and more rounded. And his rhythms are more hypnotic than ever. It's easy to imagine De Palma standing very still and wielding a baton, because the images and sounds are orchestrated.

Seeing this film is like experiencing the body of De Palma's work and seeing it in a new way. Genre techniques are circuitry; in going beyond genre, De Palma is taking some terrifying first steps. He is investing his work with a different kind of meaning. His relation to the terror in "Carrie" or "Dressed to Kill" could be gleeful because it was Pop and he could ride it out; now he's in it. When we see Jack surrounded by all the machinery that he tries to control things with, De Palma seems to be giving it a last, long, wistful look. It's as if he'd finally understood what technique is for. This is the first film he has made about the things that really matter to him. "Blow Out" begins with a joke; by the end, the joke has been turned inside out. In a way, the movie is about accomplishing the one task set for the sound-effects man at the start: he has found a better scream. It's a great movie.

—Pauline Kael
"Portrait of the Artist as a Young Gadgeteer" (The Current Cinema), July 27, 1981

RICHARD MERKIN

sidewalk in front of the grocery shop next door. I stopped and stared at this child in disbelief, as if an outrageous, an unfair, enchantment had taken place before my eyes.

A common name. A stupid flat-faced child with dirty blond hair.

My heart was beating in big thumps, like howls happening in my chest.

Sunny had met my bus in Uxbridge that summer of 1979. She was a large-boned, bright-faced woman, with silvery-brown curly hair caught back by unmatched combs on either side of her face. Even when she put on weight—which she had done—she looked not matronly but majestically girlish.

She swept me into her life as she had always done, telling me that she had thought she was going to be late, because Claire had got a bug in her ear that morning and had had to be taken to the hospital to have it flushed out. Then the dog threw up on the kitchen step, probably because she hated the trip and the house and the country, and when she—Sunny—had left to get me Johnston was making the boys clean it up because they had wanted a dog, and Claire was complaining that she could still hear something going *bzz-bzz* in her ear.

"So suppose we go someplace nice and quiet and get drunk and never go back there?" she said. "We have to, though. Johnston invited a friend whose wife and kids are away in Ireland, and they want to go and play golf."

Sunny and I had been friends in Vancouver years before. Our pregnancies had dovetailed, so that we had managed with one set of maternity clothes. In my kitchen or in hers, once a week or so, distracted by our children and sometimes reeling for lack of sleep, we stoked ourselves up on strong coffee and cigarettes and launched out on a rampage of talk—about our marriages, our fights, our personal deficiencies, our interesting and discreditable motives, our forgone ambitions. We read Jung at the same time and tried to keep track of our dreams. During that time of life that is supposed to be a reproductive daze, with the woman's mind all swamped by maternal juices, we were still compelled to discuss Simone de Beauvoir and Arthur Koestler and "The Cocktail Party."

Our husbands were not in this frame of mind at all. When we tried to talk about such things with them they would say, "Oh, that's just literature," or "You sound like Philosophy 101."

Now we had both moved away from Vancouver. But Sunny had moved with her husband and her children and her furniture, in the normal way and for the usual reason—her husband had got another job. And I had moved for the newfangled reason that was approved of mightily but temporarily and only in some special circles—leaving husband and house and all the things acquired during the marriage (except, of course, the children, who were to be parcelled about), in the hope of making a life that could be lived without hypocrisy or deprivation or shame.

I lived now on the second floor of a house in Toronto. The people downstairs—the people who owned the house—had come from Trinidad a dozen years earlier. All up and down the street, the old brick houses with their verandas and high, narrow windows, the former homes of Methodists and Presbyterians who had names like Henderson and Grisham and McAllister, were occupied by olive- or brownish-skinned people who spoke English in a way that was unfamiliar to me, if they spoke it at all, and who filled the air day and night with the smell of their spicy-sweet cooking. I was happy with all this—it made me feel as if I had made a true change, a long, necessary voyage from the house of marriage. But it was too much to expect of my daughters—who were ten and twelve years old—that they should feel the same way. I had left Vancouver in the spring and they had come to me at the beginning of the summer holidays, supposedly to stay for the whole two months. They found the smells of the street sickening and the noise frightening. It was hot—they could not sleep even with the fan I bought. We had to keep the windows open, and the back-yard parties lasted sometimes till four in the morning.

Expeditions to the Science Center and the CN Tower, to the museum and the zoo, treats in the cooled restaurants of department stores, a boat trip to Toronto Island could not make up for the absence of their friends or reconcile them to the travesty of the home that I provided. They missed their cats. They wanted their own rooms, the freedom of

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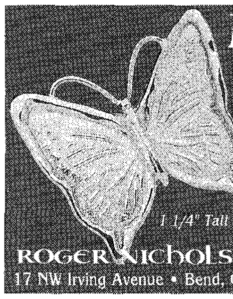

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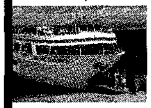

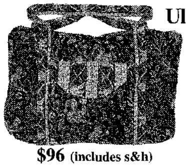

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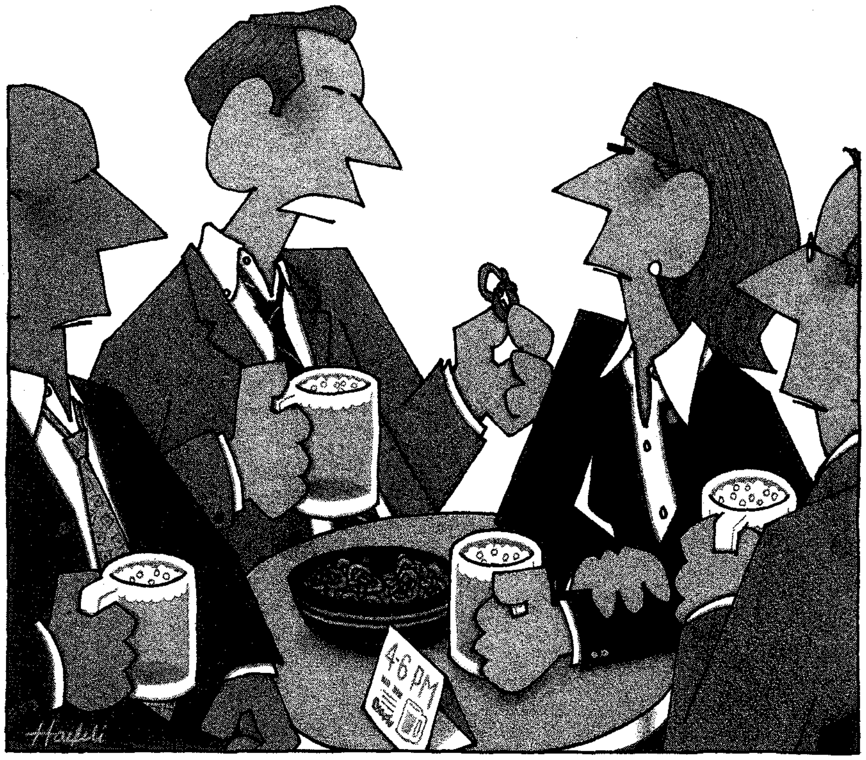

"I'm out of the closet but under the radar."

* *

their neighborhood, the dawdling stay-at-home days.

For a while they did not complain. The older one said to the younger one, "Let Mom think we're happy. Or she'll feel bad."

At last a blowup. Accusations, confessions of misery, the younger wailing "Why can't you just live at home?" and the older telling her bitterly, "Because she hates Dad."

I phoned my husband—who asked me nearly the same question and provided, on his own, nearly the same answer. I changed the tickets and helped my children pack and took them to the airport. All the way we played a silly game introduced by the older girl. You had to pick a number—twenty-seven, say, or forty-two—and then look out of the window and count the men you saw, and the twenty-seventh or forty-second man would be the one you had to marry. When I came back, alone, I gathered up all reminders of them—a cartoon the younger one had drawn, a *Glamour* magazine the older one had bought, various bits of jewelry and clothing they could wear in Toronto but not at home—and stuffed them into a garbage bag. And I did more or less the same thing every time I thought of them: I snapped my mind shut. There were miseries I could bear—those connected with men. And other miseries—those connected with children—that I could not.

I went back to living as I had lived before they came. I stopped cooking breakfast and went out every morning to get coffee and fresh rolls at the Italian deli. Back home, I would sit and write for hours at a wooden table under the windows of a former sunporch now become a makeshift kitchen. I was hoping to make my living as a writer. The sun soon heated up the little room, and the backs of my legs—I was wearing shorts—stuck to the chair. I could smell the peculiar sweetish chemical odor of my plastic sandals absorbing the sweat of my feet. I liked that—it was the smell of my industry and, I hoped, of my accomplishment. What I wrote wasn't any better than what I'd managed to write back in the old life while the potatoes cooked or the laundry thumped around in its automatic cycle. There was just more of it, and it wasn't any worse—that was

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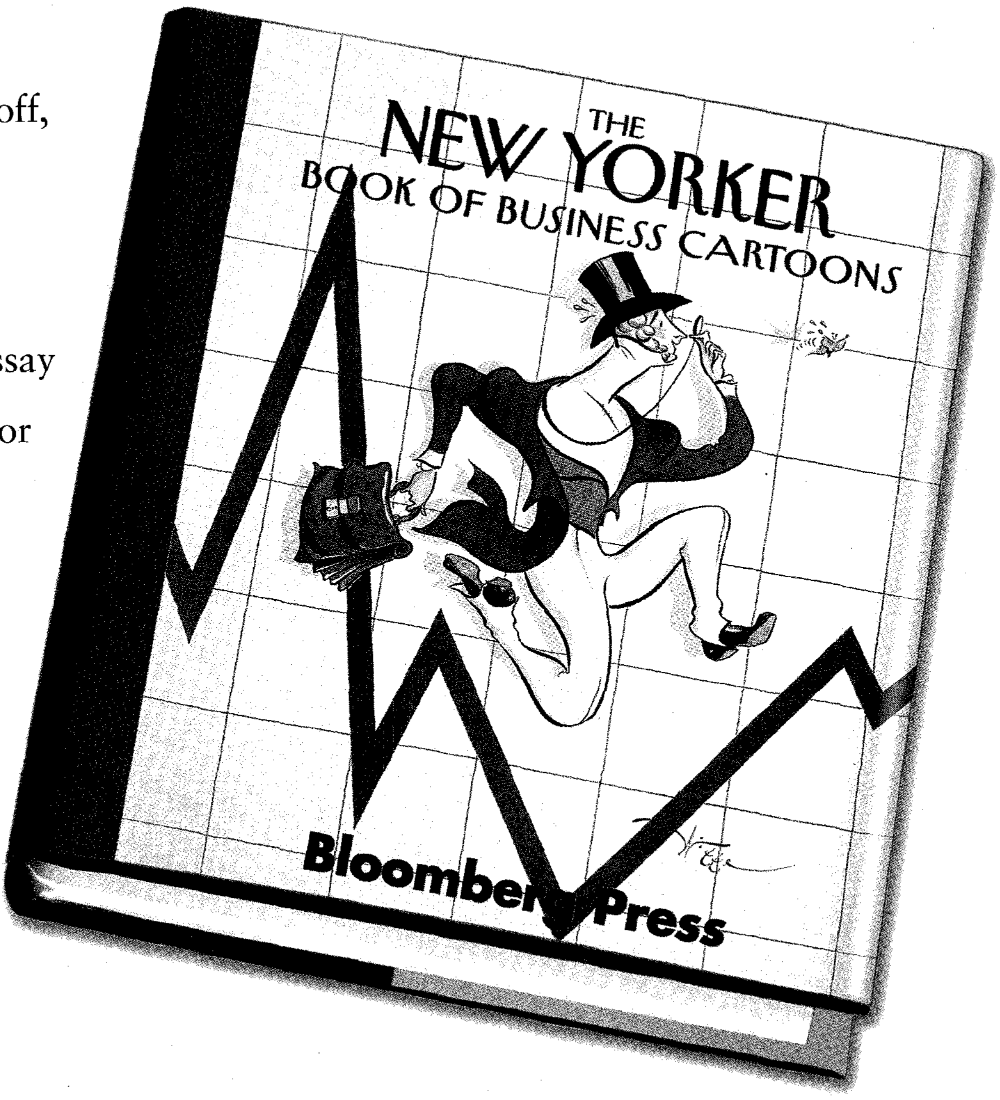
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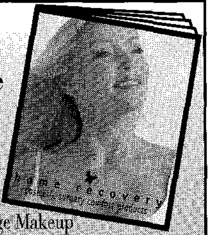

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all. And sometimes I met the man I was involved with. He had been banished when the children were with me, though I had broken this rule twice, leaving my daughters in a frigid movie house.

I had known this man before I left my marriage and he was the immediate reason I had left it, though I pretended to him—and to everyone else—that this was not so. When I met him I tried to be carefree and to show an independent spirit. We exchanged news—I made sure I had news—and we laughed and went for walks, but all I really wanted was to entice him to have sex with me, because I thought the high enthusiasm of sex fused people's best selves. I was stupid about these matters, in a way that was very risky, particularly for a woman of my age. There were times when I would be so happy, after our encounters—dazzled and secure—and there were other times when I would lie stone-heavy with misgiving, after he had taken himself off. I would feel tears running out of my eyes before I knew that I was weeping. And this was because of some shadow I had glimpsed in him, or some offhandedness, or an oblique warning he'd given me. Outside the windows, as it got dark, the back-yard parties would begin, with music and shouting and provocations that later might develop into fights, and I would be frightened, not of any hostility but of a kind of nonexistence.

In one of these moods I phoned Sunny, and got the invitation to spend the weekend in the country.

"It's beautiful here," I said. But the country we were driving through meant nothing to me. The hills were a series of green bumps, some with cows. There were low concrete bridges over weed-choked streams. Hay was harvested in a new way, rolled up and left in the fields.

"Wait till you see the house," Sunny said. "It's squalid. There was a mouse in the plumbing. Dead. We kept getting these little hairs in the bathwater. That's all dealt with now, but you never know what will be next."

She did not ask me—was it delicacy or disapproval?—about my new life. I would have told her lies, anyway, or half lies. It was hard to make the break but it had to be done. I miss the children terribly but there is always a price to be paid.

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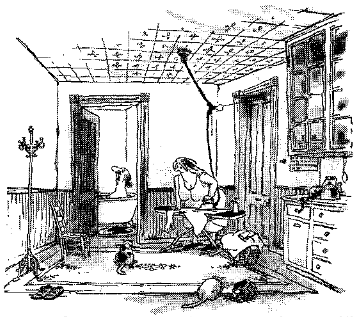

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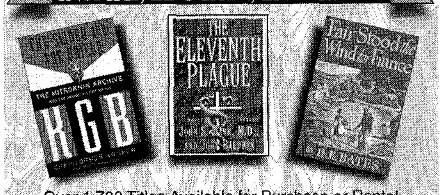

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I am learning to leave a man free and to be free myself. I am learning to take sex lightly, which is hard for me because that's not the way I started out and I'm not young, but I am learning.

A weekend, I thought. It seemed a very long time.

The bricks of the house showed a scar where a veranda had been torn away. Sunny's boys were tromping around in the yard.

"Mark lost the ball," the older one—Gregory—shouted. "Mark threw the ball over the shed and now we can't find it."

The three-year-old girl, born since I'd last seen Sunny, came running out of the kitchen door and then halted, surprised at the sight of a stranger. But she recovered herself and told me, "There was a bug thing flew in my head."

Sunny picked her up and I took up my overnight bag and we walked into the kitchen, where Mike McCallum was spreading ketchup on a piece of bread.

"It's you," we said, almost on the same breath. We laughed, I rushed toward him and he moved toward me. We shook hands.

"I thought it was your father," I said.

I don't know if I'd got as far as thinking of the well-driller. I had thought, Who is that familiar-looking man? A man who carried his body lightly, as if he would think nothing of climbing in and out of wells. Short-cropped hair, going gray, deep-set light-colored eyes. A lean face, good-humored yet austere. A customary, not disagreeable reserve.

"Couldn't be," he said. "Dad's dead."

Johnston came into the kitchen with the golf bags, and greeted me, and told Mike to hurry up, and Sunny said, "They know each other, honey. They knew each other. Of all things."

"When we were kids," Mike said.

Johnston said, "Really? That's remarkable," and we all said together what we saw he was about to say.

"Small world."

Mike and I were still looking at each other and laughing—we seemed to be making it clear to each other that this discovery that Sunny and Johnston might think remarkable was to our way of thinking really more of a miracle.

All afternoon while the men were gone I was full of happy energy. I made a peach pie for our supper and read to Claire so that she would settle down for her nap, while Sunny took the boys fishing, unsuccessfully, in the scummy creek. Then she and I sat on the floor of the front room with a bottle of wine and became friends again, talking about books instead of life.

The things Mike remembered were different from the things I remembered. He remembered walking around on the narrow top of some old cement foundation and pretending it was as high as the tallest building and that if we stumbled we would fall to our deaths. I said that must have been somewhere else. Then I remembered the foundations for a garage that had been poured, and the garage never built, where our lane met the road. Did we walk on that? We did.

I remembered wanting to holler loudly under the bridge but being afraid of the town kids. He did not remember any bridge. We both remembered the clay cannonballs, and the war.

We were washing the dishes together, so that we could talk all we wanted without being rude.

"You said your dad was dead?"

"Road accident. Coming home from a job up near Bancroft. Are your folks still alive?"

"My mother's dead. My dad married again. My stepmother's great for him. She's got him curling and bowling."

At some point I told him that I had separated from my husband, and I was living in Toronto. I said that my children had been with me for a while but were now on a holiday with their father.

He told me that he lived in Kingston, but had not been there very long. He had met Johnston recently, through his work. He was, like Johnston, a civil engineer. His wife was an Irish girl, born in Ireland but working in Canada when he met her. She was a nurse. Right now she was back in Ireland, in County Clare, visiting her family. She had the kids with her.

"How many kids?"

"Three."

When the dishes were finished we went into the front room and offered to play Scrabble with the boys so that Sunny and Johnston could go for a walk. One game—then it was supposed to be bedtime. But they persuaded us to start another round, and we were still playing when their parents came back.

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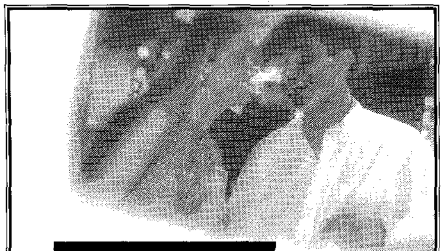

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Johnston told the boys to pack up the game and they obeyed. But Gregory thought of asking to see the stars. "This is the only place we can ever see them," he said. "At home it's all the lights and crap."

"Watch it," his father said. But then we all went outside and looked at the sky. We looked for the Pilot Star, close beside the second star in the handle of the Big Dipper. If you could see that one, Johnston said, then your eyesight was good enough to get you into the Air Force. At least that was the way it was during the Second World War.

Sunny said, "Well, I can see it, but then I know beforehand that it's there."

Mike said, the same with him.

He was standing a little ahead of me and to one side. He was actually closer to Sunny than he was to me. Nobody was behind us, and I wanted to brush against him—just lightly and accidentally against his arm or shoulder. Then if he didn't stir away—out of courtesy, taking my touch for a genuine accident?—I wanted to lay a finger against his bare neck. Was that what he would have done, if he had been standing behind me? Was that what he would have been concentrating on, instead of the stars? I had the feeling, however, that he was a scrupulous man, he would refrain.

He had slept in the guest bedroom the night before but tonight he'd moved downstairs to the fold-out sofa in the front room. Sunny had given him fresh sheets rather than unmaking and making up again the bed he had left for me.

"He's pretty clean," she said. "And after all he's an old friend."

Lying in those same sheets did not make for a peaceful night. I knew that he wouldn't come to me, no matter how small the risk was. It would be a sleazy thing to do, in the house of his friends, who would also be—if they were not already—the friends of his wife. And how could he be sure that it was what I wanted? Or that it was what he really wanted? Even I was not sure of it. Up till now, I had always been able to think of myself as a woman who was faithful to the person she was sleeping with at any given time.

My sleep was shallow, my dreams monotonously lustful, with irritating and unpleasant subplots. All night—or at least whenever I woke up, and I woke often—the crickets were singing outside my window. At first I thought it was birds, a chorus of indefatigable night birds. I had lived in cities long enough to have forgotten how crickets can make a perfect waterfall of noise.

It has to be said, too, that sometimes when I woke I found myself stranded on a dry patch. Unwelcome lucidity. What do you really know of this man? Or he of you? What music does he like, what are his politics? What are his expectations of women?

Everybody was invited to brunch the next morning, at the house of some neighbors who had a swimming pool. Mike said that he thought he would rather just go round the golf course, if that would be O.K.

Sunny said, "Sure," and looked at me. I said, "Well, I don't know if I—" and Mike said, "You don't play golf, do you?"

"No."

"Still. You could come and caddy for me."

"I'll come and caddy," Gregory said. He was ready to attach himself to any expedition of ours, sure that we would be more liberal and entertaining than his parents.

Sunny said no. "You're coming with us. Don't you want to go in the pool?"

"All their kids pee in that pool. I hope you know that."

Johnston warned us before we left that there was a prediction of rain. Mike said that we'd take our chances. I liked his saying "we" and I liked riding beside him, in the wife's seat. I felt a pleasure in the idea of us as a couple—a pleasure that I knew was as light-headed as an adolescent girl's. The notion of being a wife beguiled me, just as if I had never been one. This had never happened with the man who was now my actual lover. But now that Mike and I were alone, there was some constraint.

I said I supposed that Ireland was beautiful.

"Parts of it are really bare. Bare rock."

"Did your wife grow up there? Does she have that lovely accent?"

"You'd think she did, if you heard her. But when she goes back there, they tell her she's lost it. They tell her she sounds just like an American. American's what they always say—they don't bother with Canadian."

"And your kids—I guess they don't sound Irish at all?"

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"Nope."

"What are they, anyway—boys or girls?"

"Two boys and a girl."

I had an urge now to tell him about the contradictions, the griefs and necessities of my life. I said, "I miss my kids."

But he said nothing. No sympathetic word, no encouragement. It might be that he thought it unseemly to talk of our partners or our children, under the circumstances.

Soon after that we pulled into the parking lot beside the clubhouse, and he said—rather boisterously, as if to make up for his stiffness—"Looks like the rain scare's kept the Sunday golfers home." There was only one car in the lot. He got out and went into the office to pay the visitor's fee.

I had never been on a golf course. I had seen the game being played on television, once or twice and never by choice, and I had an idea that some of the clubs were called irons, or some of the irons clubs, and that there was one of them called a niblick, and that the course itself was called the links. When I told him this, Mike said, "Maybe you're going to be awfully bored."

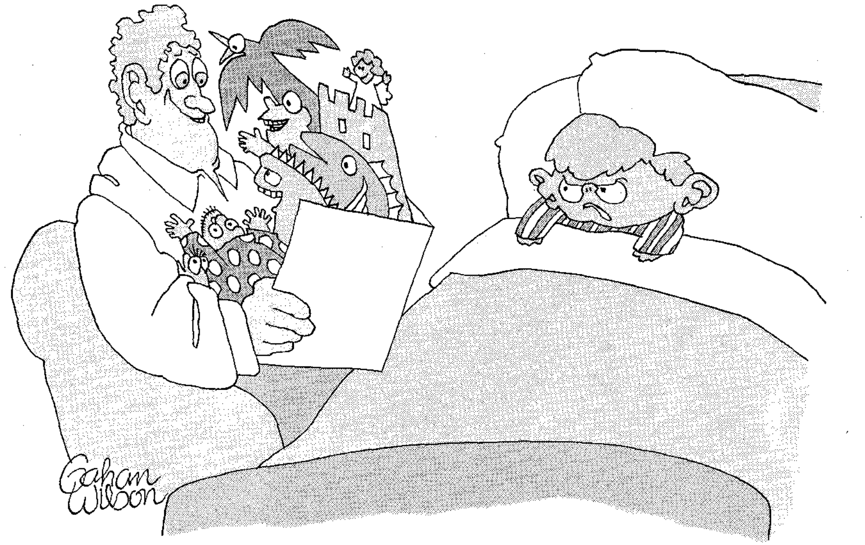
"If I am, I'll go for a walk."

That seemed to please him. He laid the weight of his warm hand on my shoulder and said, "You would, too."

My ignorance did not matter—of course, I did not really have to caddy—and I was not bored. All there was for me to do was to follow him around and watch him. Mike talked now and then, but it was hardly to me. His disconnected words were reproaches or cautious congratulations or warnings to himself, or they were hardly words at all—just the kind of noises that are meant to convey meaning, and that do convey meaning, in the long intimacy of lives lived in willing proximity. This was what I was supposed to do, then—to give him an amplified, an extended notion of himself, a reassuring sense of human padding around his solitude. I didn't think this out—it was all there in the pleasure I felt come over me as we made our way around the links. Lust that had given me shooting pains in the night was all chastened and trimmed back now, into a tidy pilot flame, attentive, wifely. I followed his setting up and choosing and pondering and squinting and swinging, and watched the course of the ball, which always seemed to me triumphant but to him usually problematic.

Walking, we hardly talked at all. Will it rain? we said. Did you feel a drop? I thought I felt a drop. Maybe not. At some point, Mike looked along the length of the course, to where the clouds had changed color, becoming dark blue instead of white, and he said without particular alarm or disappointment, "Here comes our weather." He began methodically to pack up and fasten his bag.

We were then about as far away as we could be from the clubhouse. Birds were wheeling about overhead in an agitated, indecisive way. The tops of the trees were swaying and there was a sound—it



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seemed to be above us—like the sound of a wave full of stones, crashing on the beach. Mike said, "O.K., then. We better get in here," and took my hand and hurried us across the mown grass into bushes and the tall weeds that grew between the course and the river.

The bushes right at the edge of the grass looked impenetrable, but close up there were little openings, the narrow paths that animals or people looking for golf balls had made. The ground sloped slightly downward, and we could see a bit of the river. The water was steel gray, and looked to be rolling, not breaking in a chop the way pond water would do in this rush of weather. Between it and us there was a meadow of weeds, all in bloom—goldenrod, jewelweed with its red-and-yellow bells, and what I thought were flowering nettles with pinkish-purple clusters, and wild asters. Grapevine, too, grabbing and wrapping whatever it could find, and tangling underfoot. The soil was soft, not quite gummy. Even the most frail-stemmed, delicate-looking plants had grown up almost as high as, or higher than, our heads. When we stopped and looked up through them we could see something coming, from the direction of the midnight clouds. It was the real rain, coming at us behind the splatter we were getting. It looked as if a large portion of the sky had detached itself and was bearing down, bustling and resolute, taking a not quite recognizable but animate shape. Curtains of rain—not veils but really thick and wildly slapping curtains—were driven ahead of it. We could see them distinctly, when all we were feeling, still, were these light, lazy drops. It was almost as if we were looking through a window, and not quite believing that the window would shatter, until it did, and rain and wind hit us, all together, and my hair was lifted and fanned out above my head. I felt as if my skin might do that next.

I tried to turn around then—I had an urge that I had not felt before, to run out of the bushes and head for the clubhouse. But I could not move. It was hard enough to stand up—out in the open the wind would have knocked you down at once.

Stooping, butting his head through the weeds and against the wind, Mike got around in front of me, all the time

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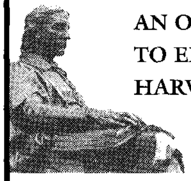

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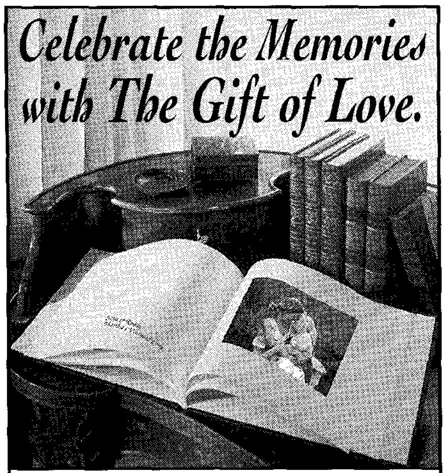

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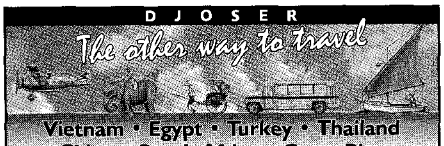
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holding on to my arm. Then he faced me, with his body between me and the storm. He said something, right into my face, but I couldn't hear him. He had hold of both my arms now, and he worked his hands down to my wrists and held them tight. He pulled me down—both of us staggering, the moment we tried to make any change of position—so that we were crouched close to the ground. So close together that we could not look at each other—we could only look down at the crushed plants and our soaked shoes, and the miniature rivers already breaking up the earth around our feet. Then he released my wrists and clamped his hands on my shoulders. His touch was still one of restraint more than comfort.

We remained like this until the wind passed over. That could not have been more than five minutes, perhaps only two or three. Rain still fell, but now it was ordinary heavy rain. He took his hands away, and we stood up, shakily. Our shirts and slacks were stuck fast to our bodies. We tried to smile, but had hardly the strength for it. Then we kissed and pressed together briefly. This was more of a ritual, a recognition of survival rather than of our bodies' inclinations. Our lips slid against each other, slick and cool, and the pressure of the embrace made us slightly chilly, as fresh water was squished out of our clothing.

Every minute, the rain grew lighter. We made our way unsteadily through the half-flattened weeds, then between the thick and drenching bushes. Big tree branches had been hurled all over the golf course. We walked in the open, detouring around the fallen limbs. The rain had almost stopped, and the air brightened. I was walking with my head bent—so that the water from my hair fell to the ground and not down my face—and I felt the heat of the sun strike my shoulders before I looked up into its festival of light.

I stood still and took a deep breath. Now was the time, when we were soaked and safe and confronted with radiance. Now something had to be said.

"There's something I didn't mention to you."

His voice surprised me, like the sun. But in the opposite way. It had a weight to it, a warning—determination edged with apology.

"About our youngest boy," he said. "Our youngest boy was killed last summer."

Oh.

"He was run over," he said. "I was the one ran over him. Backing out of our driveway."

I stopped again. He stopped with me. Both of us stared ahead.

"His name was Brian. He was three. The thing was, I thought he was upstairs in bed. The others were still up, but he'd been put to bed. Then he'd got up again.

"I should have looked, though. I should have looked more carefully."

I thought of the moment when he got out of the car. The noise he must have made. The moment when the child's mother came running out of the house. This isn't him, he isn't here, it didn't happen.

Upstairs in bed.

He started walking again, entering the parking lot. I walked a little behind him. And I did not say anything—not one kind, common, helpless word. We had passed right by that.

He didn't say, It was my fault and I'll never get over it. I'll never forgive myself. But I do as well as I can.

Or, My wife forgives me, but she'll never get over it, either.

I knew all that. I knew now that he was a person who had hit rock bottom. A person who knew—as I did not know, did not come near knowing—exactly what rock bottom was. He and his wife knew that together and it bound them, as something like that would either break you apart or bind you, for life. Not that they would live at rock bottom. But they would share a knowledge of it—that cool, empty, locked, and central space.

I said, "It isn't fair." I was talking about the dealing out of these idle punishments, these wicked and ruinous swipes. Worst of all when there is one whose act, probably an uncharacteristic act, is singly and permanently responsible.

That's what I was talking about. But meaning also—*It is not fair. What has this got to do with us?*

"Sunny and Johnston don't know about it," he said. "None of the people know, that we met since we moved. It seemed as if it might work better that way. Even the other kids—they don't hardly ever mention him. Never mention his name."

I was not one of the people among

whom they would make their new, hard, normal life. I was a person who knew—that was all. A person he had, on his own, who knew.

"That's strange," he said, looking around before he opened the trunk of the car to stow away the golf bag. "What happened to the guy who was parked here before? Didn't you see another car parked here when we came in? But I never saw one other person on the course. Did you?"

I said no.

"Mystery," he said. And then, "Well."

That was a word that I used to hear fairly often, said in that same tone of voice, when I was a child. A bridge between one thing and another, or a conclusion, or a way of saying something that couldn't be any more fully said, or thought.

While we were driving back, Mike and I both noticed, and spoke about, a prickling, an itch or burning, on our bare forearms, the backs of our hands, and around our ankles. Places that had not been protected by our clothing when we crouched in the weeds. I remembered the nettles. But those plants with the big pinkish-purple flowers are not nettles. I have since discovered that they are called joe-pye weed. The stinging nettles that we must have got into are more insignificant plants, with stalks wickedly outfitted with fine, fierce, skin-piercing and inflaming spines.

Sitting in Sunny's farmhouse kitchen, wearing dry clothes, we told about our adventure and revealed our rashes. Sunny knew what to do for us. On an earlier weekend the boys had gone down into the weedy mud-bottomed field behind the barn and come back covered with welts and blotches. Cold compresses were prescribed, an antihistamine lotion, and pills. There was still part of a bottle of lotion left, and there were some pills, too.

The fact that we had chosen to go off together and that we had this adventure—an adventure that left its evidence on our bodies—seemed to rouse in Sunny and Johnston a teasing excitement. Droll looks from him, a bright solicitousness from her. And Sunny enjoyed ministering to us. In fact, our plight put the whole family into a good humor, brought them out of the doldrums of the drenched day and the cancelled pool party.

The children thought it was funny to see us sitting there with our feet in basins, our arms and hands clumsy with their wrappings of thick cloths. Claire especially was delighted with the sight of our naked, foolish, adult feet. Mike wriggled his long toes for her, and she broke into fits of alarmed giggles.

Well. It would be the same old thing, if we ever met again. Or if we didn't. Love that was not usable, that knew its place. (Some would say not real, because it would never risk getting its neck wrung, or turning into a bad joke, or sadly wearing out.) Not risking a thing yet staying alive as a sweet trickle, an underground resource. With the weight of this new stillness on it, this seal.

I never asked Sunny for news of him, or got any, during all the years of our dwindling friendship. ♦

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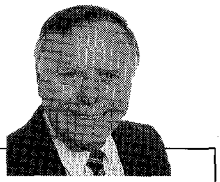

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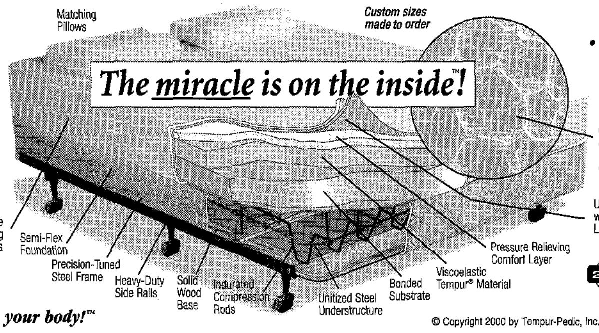
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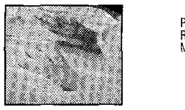

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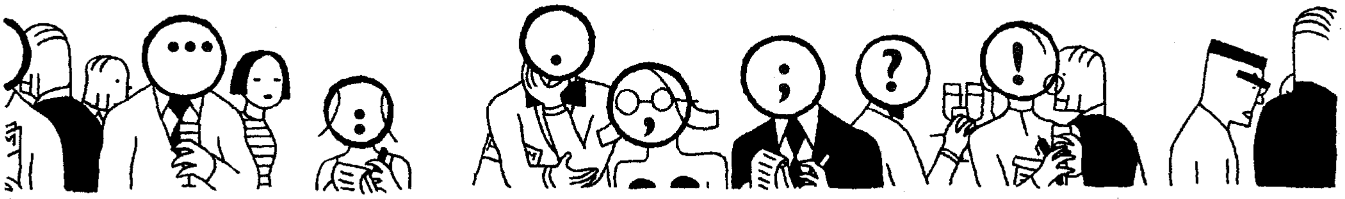


A CRITIC AT LARGE

EVERYWOMAN.COM

Getting out of the house with Martha Stewart.

BY JOAN DIDION

According to "The Web Guide to Martha Stewart—The UNOFFICIAL Site!," which was created by a former graduate student named Kerry Ogata as "a thesis procrastination technique" and then passed on to those who now maintain it, the fifty-eight-year-old chairman and C.E.O. of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia L.L.C. ("MSO" on the New York Stock Exchange) needs only four hours of sleep a night, utilizes the saved hours by grooming her six cats and gardening by flashlight, prefers Macs in the office and a PowerBook for herself, commutes between her house in Westport and her two houses in East Hampton and her Manhattan apartment in a G.M.C. Suburban ("with chauffeur") or a Jaguar XJ6 ("she drives herself"), was raised the second-oldest of six children in a Polish-American family in Nutley, New Jersey, has one daughter, Alexis, and survived "a non-amicable divorce" from her husband of twenty-six years, Andrew Stewart ("Andy" on the site), who then "married Martha's former assistant who is 21 years younger than he is."

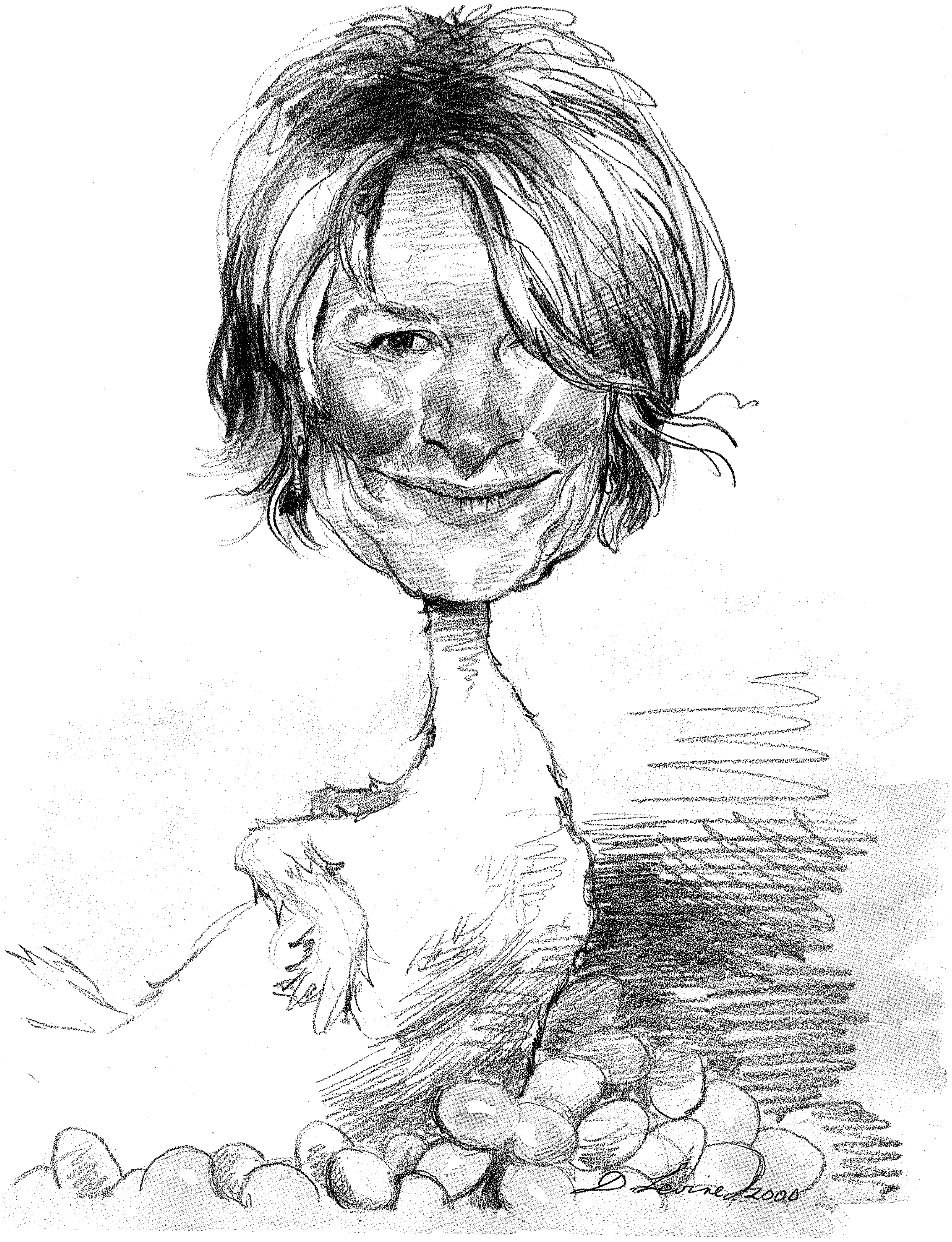
Contributors to the site's "Opinions" page, like good friends everywhere, have mixed feelings about Andy's defection, which occurred in 1987, while Martha was on the road promoting "Martha Stewart Weddings," the preface to which offered a possibly prescient view of her own 1961 wedding. "I was a naïve nineteen-year-old, still a student at Barnard, and Andy was beginning Yale Law School, so it seemed appropriate to be married in St. Paul's Chapel at Columbia in an Episcopalian service, mainly because we didn't have anyplace else to go," she wrote, and included a photograph showing the wedding dress she and her mother had made of embroidered Swiss organdy bought on West Thirty-eighth Street. On-line, the relative cases of "Martha" and of "Andy" and even of "Alexis," who originally took her mother's side in the divorce, get debated with startling familiarity. "BTW, I don't blame Andy," one contributor offers. "I think he took all he could. I think it's too bad that Alexis felt she had to choose." Another contributor, another view: "I work fifty hours a week and admit sometimes I don't have time to 'be all that I can be' but when Martha started out she was doing this part-time and raising Alexis and making a home for that schmuck Andy (I bet he is sorry he ever left her)."

Although "The UNOFFICIAL Site!" is just that, unofficial, "not affiliated with Martha Stewart, her agents, Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, LLC or any other Martha Stewart Enterprises," its fairly lighthearted approach to its subject's protean competence ("What can't Martha do? According to Martha herself, 'Hang-gliding, and I hate shopping for clothes' ") should in no way be construed as disloyalty to Martha's objectives, which are, as the prospectus prepared for Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia's initial public offering last October explained, "to provide our original 'how-to' content and information to as many consumers as possible" and "to turn our consumers into 'doers' by offering them the information and products they need for do-it-yourself ingenuity 'the Martha Stewart way.' " The creators and users of "The UNOFFICIAL Site!" clearly maintain a special relationship with the subject at hand, as do the creators and users of other unofficial or self-invented sites crafted in the same spirit: "My Martha Stewart Page," say, or "Gothic Martha Stewart," which advises teen-agers living at home on how they can "goth up" their rooms without freaking their parents ("First of all, don't paint everything black") by taking their cues from Martha.

"Martha adores finding old linens and gently worn furniture at flea markets," users of "Gothic Martha Stewart" are reminded. "She sews a lot of her own household dressings. She paints and experiments with unusual painting techniques on objects small and large. She loves flowers, live and dried . . . and even though her surroundings look very rich, many of her ideas are created from rather simple and inexpensive materials, like fabric scraps and secondhand dishes." For the creator of "My Martha Stewart Page," even the "extremely anal" quality of Martha's expressed preoccupation with the appearance of her liquid-detergent dispenser can be a learning experience, a source of concern that becomes a source of illumination: "It makes me worry about her. . . . Of course it is just this strangeness that makes me love her. She helps me know I'm OK—everyone's OK. . . . She seems perfect, but she's not. She's obsessed. She's frantic. She's a control freak beyond my wildest dreams. And that shows me two things: A) no one is perfect and B) there's a price for everything."

There is an unusual bonding here, a proprietary intimacy that eludes conventional precepts of merchandising to go to the very heart of the enterprise, the

DAVID LEVINE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brand, what Martha prefers to call the "presence": the two magazines (*Martha Stewart Living* and *Martha Stewart Weddings*) that between them reach ten million readers, the twenty-seven books that have sold eight and a half million copies, the weekday radio show carried on two hundred and seventy stations, the syndicated "AskMartha" column that appears in two hundred and thirty-three newspapers, the televised show six days a week on CBS, the weekly slot on the CBS morning show, the cable-TV show ("From Martha's Kitchen," the Food Network's top-rated weekly show among women aged twenty-five to fifty-four), the Web site (www.marthastewart.com) with more than one million registered users and six hundred and twenty-seven thousand hits a month, the merchandising tie-ins with Kmart and Sears and Sherwin-Williams (Kmart alone last year sold more than a billion dollars' worth of Martha Stewart merchandise), the catalogue operation (Martha by Mail) from which some twenty-eight hundred products (Valentine Garlands, Valentine Treat Bags, Ready-to-Decorate Cookies, Sweetheart Cake Rings, Heart Dessert Scoops, Heart Rosette Sets, Heart-Shaped Pancake Molds, and Lace-Paper Valentine Kits, to name a few from the on-line "Valentine's Day" pages) can be ordered either from the catalogues themselves (eleven annual editions, fifteen million copies) or from Web pages with exceptionally inviting layouts and seductively logical links.

These products are not inexpensive. The Lace-Paper Valentine Kit contains enough card stock and paper lace to make "about forty" valentines, which could be viewed as something less than a buy at forty-two dollars plus time and labor. On the "Cakes and Cake Stands" page, the Holiday Cake-Stencil Set, which consists of eight nine-inch plastic stencils for the decorative dusting of cakes with confectioner's sugar or cocoa, sells for twenty-eight dollars. On the "marthasflowers" pages, twenty-five tea roses, which are available for eighteen dollars a dozen at Roses Only in New York, cost fifty-two dollars, and the larger of the two "suggested vases" to put them in (an example of the site's linking logic) another seventy-eight dollars. A set of fifty Scalloped Tulle Rounds, eight-and-three-quarter-inch circles of tulle in which to tie up wedding favors, costs eighteen dollars, and the seam binding used to tie them ("sold separately," another natural link) costs, in the six-color Seam-Binding Ribbon Collection, fifty-six dollars. Seam binding sells retail for pennies, and, at Paron on West Fifty-seventh Street in New York, not the least expensive source, one-hundred-and-eight-inch-wide tulle sells for four dollars a yard. Since the amount of one-hundred-and-eight-inch tulle required to make fifty Scalloped Tulle Rounds would be slightly over a yard, the on-line buyer can be paying only for the imprimatur of "Martha," whose genius it was to take the once familiar notion of doing-it-yourself to previously uncharted territory: somewhere east of actually doing it yourself, somewhere west of paying Robert Isabell to do it.

This is a billion-dollar company the only real product of which, in other words, is Martha Stewart herself, an unusual business condition acknowledged in the prospectus prepared for Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia's strikingly successful October I.P.O. "Our business would be adversely affected if: Martha Stewart's public image or reputation were to be tarnished," the "Risk Factors" section of the prospectus read in part. "Martha Stewart, as well as her name, her image, and the trademarks and other intellectual property rights relating to these, are integral to our marketing efforts and form the core of our brand name. Our continued success and the value of our brand name therefore depends, to a large degree, on the reputation of Martha Stewart."

The perils of totally identifying a brand with a single living and therefore vulnerable human being were much discussed around the time of the I.P.O.,

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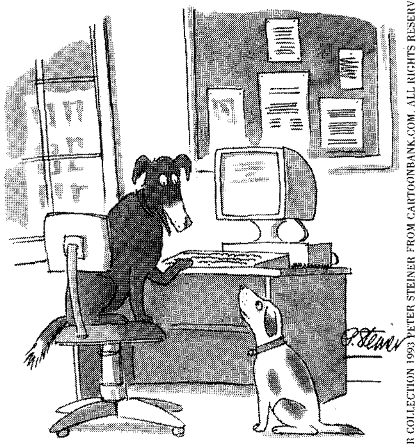

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and the question of what would happen to Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia if Martha Stewart were to become ill or die ("the diminution or loss of the services of Martha Stewart," in the words of the prospectus) remained open. "That was always an issue for us," Don Logan, the president of Time Inc., told the Los Angeles *Times* in 1997, a few months after Stewart managed to raise enough of what she called "internally generated capital," $53.3 million, to buy herself out of Time Warner, which had been resisting expansion of a business built entirely around a single personality. "I think we are now spread very nicely over an area where our information can be trusted," Stewart herself maintained, and it did seem clear that the very expansion and repetition of the name that had made Time Warner nervous—every "Martha Stewart" item sold, every "Martha Stewart Everyday" commercial aired—was paradoxically serving to insulate the brand from the possible loss of the personality behind it.

The related question, of what would happen if "Martha Stewart's public image or reputation were to be tarnished," seemed less worrisome, since in any practical way the question of whether it was possible to tarnish Martha Stewart's public image or reputation had already been answered, with the 1997 publication and ascension to the New York *Times* best-seller list of "Just Desserts," an unauthorized biography of Martha Stewart by Jerry Oppenheimer, whose previous books were unauthorized biographies of Rock Hudson, Barbara Walters, and Ethel Kennedy. "My investigative juices began to flow," Oppenheimer wrote in the preface to "Just Desserts." "If her stories were true, I foresaw a book about a perfect woman who had brought perfection to the masses. If her stories were not true, I foresaw a book that would shatter myths."

Investigative juices flowing, Oppenheimer discovered that Martha was "driven." Martha, moreover, sometimes "didn't tell the whole story." Martha could be "a real screamer" when situations did not go as planned, although the case Oppenheimer makes on this point suggests, at worst, merit on both sides. Martha was said to have "started to shriek," for example, when a catering partner backed a car over the "picture-perfect" Shaker

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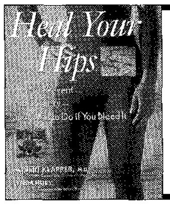

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picnic basket she had just finished packing with her own blueberry pies. Similarly, Martha was said to have been "just totally freaked" when a smokehouse fire interrupted the shooting of a holiday special and she found that the hose she had personally dragged to the smokehouse ("followed by various blasé crew people, faux-concerned family members, smirking kitchen assistants, and a macho Brazilian groundskeeper") was too short to reach the flames. After running back to the house, getting an extension for the hose, and putting out the fire, Martha, many would think understandably, exchanged words with the groundskeeper, "whom she fired on the spot in front of everyone after he talked back to her."

Other divined faults include idealizing her early family life (p. 34), embellishing "everything" (p. 42), omitting a key ingredient when a rival preteen caterer asked for her chocolate-cake recipe (p. 43), telling readers of *Martha Stewart Living* that she had as a young girl "sought to discover the key to good literature" even though "a close friend" reported that she had "passionately devoured" the Nancy Drew and Cherry Ames novels (p. 48), misspelling "villainous" in a review of William Makepeace Thackeray's "Vanity Fair" for the Nutley High School literary magazine (p. 51), having to ask what Kwanza was during a 1995 appearance on "Larry King Live" (p. 71), and not only wanting a larger engagement diamond than the one Andy had picked out for her at Harry Winston but obtaining it, at a better price, in the diamond district (p. 101). "That should have set off an alarm," a "lifelong friend" told Oppenheimer. "How many women would do something like that? It was a bad omen."

This lumping together of insignificant immaturities and economies for conversion into character flaws (a former assistant in the catering business Martha ran in Westport during the nineteen-seventies presents the damning charge "Nothing went to waste. . . . Martha's philosophy was like someone at a restaurant who had eaten half his steak and tells the waiter 'Oh, wrap it up, and I'll take it home' ") continues for four hundred and fourteen pages, at which point Oppenheimer, in full myth-shattering mode, reveals his trump card, "an eerie corporate manifesto" that "somehow slipped out of Martha's offices and made its way from one Time Inc. executive's desk to another and eventually from a Xerox machine to the outside world. . . . The white paper, replete with what was described as an incomprehensible flow chart, declared, in part":

> In Martha's vision, the shared value of the MSL enterprises are highly personal—reflecting her individual goals, beliefs, values and aspirations. . . . "Martha's Way" can be obtained because she puts us in direct touch with everything we need to know, and tells/shows us exactly what we have to do. . . . MSL enterprises are founded on the proposition that Martha herself is both leader and teacher. . . . While the ranks of "teaching disciples" within MSL may grow and extend, their authority rests on their direct association with Martha; their work emanates from her approach and philosophies; and their techniques, and products and results meet her test. . . . The magazine, books, television series, and other distribution sources are only vehicles to enable personal communication with Martha. . . . She is not, and won't allow herself to be, an institutional image and fiction like Betty Crocker. . . . She is the creative and driving center. . . . By listening to Martha and following her lead, we can achieve real results in our homes too—ourselves—just like she has. . . . It is easy to do. Martha has already "figured it out." She will personally take us by the hand and show us how to do it.

Oppenheimer construes this purloined memo or mission statement as sinister, of a piece with the Guyana Kool-Aid massacre ("From its wording, some wondered whether Martha's world was more gentrified Jonestown than happy homemaker"), but in fact it remains an unexceptionable, and quite accurate, assessment of what makes the enterprise go. Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia L.L.C. connects on a level that transcends the absurdly labor-intensive and in many cases prohibitively expensive table settings and decorating touches (the "poinsettia wreath made entirely of ribbon" featured on one December show would require of even a diligent maker, Martha herself allowed, "a couple of hours" and, "if you use the very best ribbon, two or three hundred dollars") over which its chairman toils six mornings a week on CBS. Nor is the connection about her recipes, which are the recipes of Sunbelt Junior League cookbooks (Grapefruit Mimosas, Apple Cheddar Turnovers, and Southwestern Style S'Mores are a few from the most recent issue of *Martha Stewart Entertaining*), reflecting American middle-

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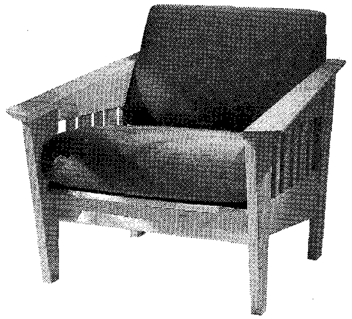
class home cooking as it has existed pretty much through the postwar years. There is in a Martha Stewart recipe none of, say, Elizabeth David's transforming logic and assurance, none of Julia Child's mastery of technique.

What there is instead is "Martha," full focus, establishing "personal communication" with the viewer or reader, showing, telling, leading, teaching, "loving it" when the simplest possible shaken-in-a-jar vinaigrette emulsifies right there onscreen. She presents herself not as an authority but as the friend who has "figured it out," the enterprising if occasionally manic neighbor who will waste no opportunity to share an educational footnote. "True," or "Ceylon," cinnamon, the reader of *Martha Stewart Living* will learn, "originally came from the island now called Sri Lanka," and "by the time of the Roman Empire . . . was valued at fifteen times its weight in silver." In a television segment about how to serve champagne, Martha will advise her viewers that the largest champagne bottle, the Balthazar, was named after the king of Babylon, "555 to 539 B.C." While explaining how to decorate the house for the holidays around the theme "The Twelve Days of Christmas," Martha will slip in this doubtful but nonetheless useful gloss, a way for the decorator to perceive herself as doing something more significant than painting pressed-paper eggs with two or three coats of white semi-gloss acrylic paint, followed by another two or three coats of yellow-tinted acrylic varnish, and finishing the result with ribbon and beads: "With the egg so clearly associated with new life, it is not surprising that the six geese a-laying represented the six days of Creation in the carol."

The message Martha is actually sending, the reason large numbers of American women count watching her a comforting and obscurely inspirational experience, seems not very well understood. There has been a flurry of academic work done on the cultural meaning of her success (in the summer of 1998, the New York *Times* reported that "about two dozen scholars across the United States and Canada" were producing such studies as "A Look at Linen Closets: Liminality, Structure and Anti-

Different and comfortable with it.



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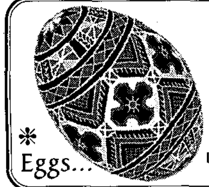

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Structure in Martha Stewart Living” and locating “the fear of transgression” in the magazine’s “recurrent images of fences, hedges and garden walls”), but there remains, both in the bond she makes and in the outrage she provokes, something unaddressed, something pitched, like a dog whistle, too high for traditional textual analysis. The outrage, which reaches sometimes startling levels, centers on the misconception that she has somehow tricked her admirers into not noticing the ambition that brought her to their attention. To her critics, she seems to represent a fraud to be exposed, a wrong to be righted. “She’s a shark,” one declares in *Salon*. “However much she’s got, Martha wants more. And she wants it her way and in her world, not in the balls-out boys’ club realms of real estate or technology, but in the delicate land of doily hearts and wedding cakes.”

“I can’t believe people don’t see the irony in the fact that this ‘ultimate homemaker’ has made a multi-million dollar empire out of baking cookies and selling bed sheets,” a posting reads in *Salon’s* “ongoing discussion” of Martha. “I read an interview in *Wired* where she said she gets home at 11pm most days, which means she’s obviously too busy to be the perfect mom/wife/homemaker—a role which many women feel like they have to live up to because of the image MS projects.” Another reader cuts to the chase: “Wasn’t there some buzz a while back about Martha stealing her daughter’s BF?” The answer: “I thought that was Erica Kane. You know, when she stole Kendra’s BF. I think you’re getting them confused. Actually, why would any man want to date MS? She is so frigid looking that my television actually gets cold when she’s on.” “The trouble is that Stewart is about as genuine as Hollywood,” a writer in *The Scotsman* charges. “Hers may seem to be a nostalgic siren call for a return to Fifties-style homemaking with an updated elegance, but is she in fact sending out a fraudulent message—putting pressure on American women to achieve impossible perfection in yet another sphere, one in which, unlike ordinary women, Stewart herself has legions of helpers?”

This entire notion of “the perfect mom/wife/homemaker,” of the “nostalgic siren call for a return to Fifties-style homemaking,” is a considerable misun-

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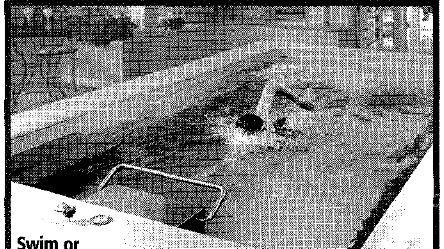

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derstanding of what Martha Stewart actually transmits, the promise she makes her readers and viewers, which is that know-how in the house will translate to can-do outside it. What she offers, and what more strictly professional shelter and food magazines and shows do not, is the promise of transferred manna, transferred luck. She projects a level of taste that transforms the often pointlessly ornamented details of what she is actually doing. The possibility of moving out of the perfected house and into the headier ether of executive action, of doing as Martha does, is clearly presented: "Now I, as a single human being, have six personal fax numbers, fourteen personal phone numbers, seven car-phone numbers, and two cell-phone numbers," as she told readers of *Martha Stewart Living*. On October 19th, the evening of her triumphant I.P.O., she explained, on "The Charlie Rose Show," the genesis of the enterprise. "I was serving a desire—not only mine, but every homemaker's desire, to elevate that job of homemaker," she said. "It was floundering, I think. And we all wanted to escape it, to get out of the house, get that high-paying job and pay somebody else to do everything that we didn't think was really worthy of our attention. And all of a sudden I realized: it was terribly worthy of our attention."

Think about this. Here was a woman who had elevated "that job of homemaker" to a level where even her G.M.C. Suburban came equipped with a Sony MZ-B3 MiniDisc Recorder for dictation and a Sony ICD-50 Recorder for short messages and a Watchman FDL-PT22 TV set, plus phones, plus PowerBook. Here was a woman whose idea of how to dress for "that job of homemaker" involved Jil Sander. "Jil's responded to the needs of people like me," she is quoted as having said on "The UNOFFICIAL Site!" "I'm busy; I travel a lot; I want to look great in a picture." Here was a woman who had that very October morning been driven down to the big board to dispense brioches and fresh-squeezed orange juice from a striped tent while Morgan Stanley Dean Witter and Merrill Lynch and Bear, Stearns and Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette and Banc of America Securities increased the value of her personal stock in the company she personally invented to $614 million.

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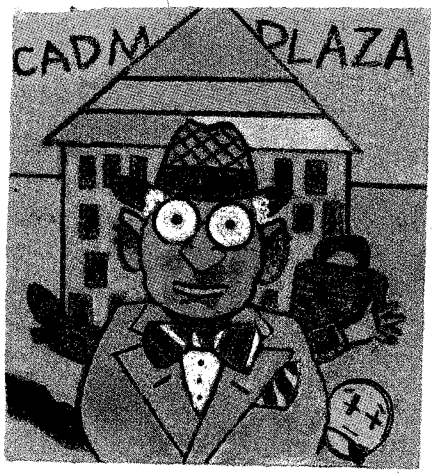

RICHARD MERKIN

In all sorts of circumstances, certain people in Brooklyn will commit murder. This fact fascinates Benjamin Shine more than it appalls him. Shine is a peaceable gentleman from Borough Park who would hate to be asked which he prefers—a sunny afternoon stroll alongside the Belt Parkway with his wife, Tillie, or a dukes-up double-murder trial. He is a self-taught student of the behavior of criminals, innocents, witnesses, lawyers, judges, and jurors. He is a court buff. As a sideline, he happens to be a student of the behavior of his fellow court buffs. Most weekdays, a dozen or more buffs show up at the State Supreme Court Building on Cadman Plaza, in downtown Brooklyn. Shine attends as regularly as any back-seat jurisconsult in the borough.

Although Shine has lived in Brooklyn for most of his seventy-three years, he is no provincial. He acknowledges that the other boroughs of New York City have bred their own miscreants. Having spent the past dozen years watching criminal trials—mainly murder trials—in Brooklyn, however, he has found it sensible and convenient to become a specialist. Consequently, he takes more interest in a corpse that has been deposited in an airshaft in Flatbush than in one that has turned up in the trunk of an automobile at LaGuardia Airport or in a vacant lot near Hunts Point. Shine realizes that in addition to murderers there are anti-social types out there who have the capacity for rape, theft, burglary, kidnapping, arson, or aimless mayhem—at times, of course, overlapping occurs—but he devotes most of his attention to homicides. He is not ghoulish, merely curious. "Where there's murder," he often says, quite accurately, "you know something's doing."

—Mark Singer
"Court Buff" (Profiles),
December 15, 1980

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This does not play into any "nostalgic siren call" for a return to the kind of "homemaking" that seized America during those postwar years when the conversion of industry to peacetime production mandated the creation of a market for Kelvinators, yet Martha was the first to share the moment with her readers.

"The mood was festive, the business community receptive, and the stock began trading with the new symbol MSO," she confided in her "Letter from Martha" in the December *Martha Stewart Living*, and there between the lines was the promise from the mission statement: *It is easy to do. Martha has already "figured it out." She will personally take us by the hand and show us how to do it.* What she will show us how to do, it turns out, is a little more invigorating than your average poinsettia-wreath project: "The process was extremely interesting, from deciding exactly what the company was (an 'integrated multimedia company' with promising internet capabilities) to creating a complicated and lengthy prospectus that was vetted and revetted (only to be vetted again by the Securities and Exchange Commission) to selling the company with a road show that took us to more than twenty cities in fourteen days (as far off as Europe)." This is getting out of the house with a vengeance, and on your own terms, the secret dream of any woman who has ever made a success of a PTA cake sale. "You could bottle that chili sauce," neighbors say to home cooks all over America. "You could make a fortune on those date bars." You could bottle it, you could sell it, you can survive when all else fails: I myself believed for most of my adult life that I could support myself and my family, in the catastrophic absence of all other income sources, by catering.

The "cultural meaning" of Martha Stewart's success, in other words, lies deep in the success itself, which is why even her troubles and strivings are part of the message, not detrimental but integral to the brand. She has branded herself not as Superwoman but as Everywoman, a distinction that seems to remain unclear to her critics. Martha herself gets it, and talks about herself in print as if catching up her oldest friend. "I sacrificed family, husband," she said in a 1996 *Fortune* conversation with Charlotte Beers, the former C.E.O. of Ogilvy & Mather and a member of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia's board of directors, and Darla Moore, the president of Richard Rainwater's investment firm and the inventor of "debtor in possession" financing for companies in bankruptcy. The tone of this conversation was odd, considerably more confessional than the average dialogue among senior executives who know they are being taped by *Fortune*. "Not my choice," Martha confided about her divorce. "His choice. Now, I'm so happy that it happened. It took a long time for me to realize that it freed me to do more things. I don't think I would have accomplished what I have if I had stayed married. No way. And it allowed me to make friends that I know I never would have had."

Martha's readers understand her divorce, both its pain and its upside. They saw her through it, just as they saw her through her dealings with the S.E.C., her twenty-city road show, her triumph on Wall Street. This relationship between Martha and her readers is a good deal more complicated than the many parodies of and jokes about it would allow. "While fans don't grow on fruit trees (well, some do), they can be found all over America: in malls, and Kmarts, in tract houses and trailer parks, in raised ranches, Tudor condos and Winnebagos," the parody Martha is made to say in HarperCollins' "Martha Stuart's Better Than You at Entertaining." "Wherever there are women dissatisfied with how they live, with who they are and who they are not, that is where you'll find potential fans of mine." These parodies are themselves interesting: too broad, misogynistic in a cartoon way (stripping Martha to her underwear has been a reliable motif of countless online parodies), curiously nervous ("Keeping Razors Circumcision-Sharp" is one feature in "Martha Stuart's Better Than You at Entertaining"), oddly uncomfortable, a little too intent on marginalizing a rather considerable number of women by making light of their situations and their aspirations.

Something here is perceived as threatening, and a glance at "The UNOFFICIAL Site!," the subliminal focus of which is somewhere other than on homemaking skills, suggests what it

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is. What makes Martha "a good role model in many ways," one contributor writes, is that "she's a strong woman who's in charge, and she has indeed changed the way our country, if not the world, views what used to be called 'women's work.'" From an eleven-year-old: "Being successful is important in life. . . . It is fun to say 'When I become Martha Stewart I'm going to have all the things Martha has.'" Even a contributor who admits to an "essentially anti-Martha persona" admires her "intelligence" and "drive," the way in which this "supreme chef, baker, gardener, decorator, artist, and entrepreneur" showed what it took "to get where she is, where most men aren't and can't. . . . She owns her own corporation in her own name, her own magazine, her own show."

A keen interest in and admiration for business acumen pervades the site. "I know people are threatened by Martha and Time Warner Inc. is going to blow a very 'good thing' if they let Martha and her empire walk in the near future," a contributor to "The UNOFFICIAL Site!" wrote at the time Stewart was trying to buy herself out of Time Warner. "I support Martha in everything she does and I would bet if a man wanted to attach his name to all he did . . . this wouldn't be a question." Their own words tell the story these readers and viewers take from Martha: Martha is *in charge*, Martha is *where most men aren't and can't*, Martha has *her own magazine*, Martha has *her own show*, Martha not only has *her own corporation* but has it *in her own name*.

This is not a story about a woman who made the best of traditional skills. This is a story about a woman who did her own I.P.O. This is the "woman's pluck" story, the dust-bowl story, the burying-your-child-on-the-trail story, the I-will-never-go-hungry-again story, the Mildred Pierce story, the story about how the sheer nerve of even professionally unskilled women can prevail, show the men; the story that has historically encouraged women in this country, even as it has threatened men. The dreams and the fears into which Martha Stewart taps are not of "feminine" domesticity but of female power, of the woman who sits down at the table with the men and, still in her apron, walks away with the chips. ♦

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BOOKS

IS SEX NECESSARY?

A history of the revolution.

BY JOHN UPDIKE

History begins where memory leaves off. Ever younger historians now tackle events still remembered by living participants—Daniel Goldhagen on the Holocaust, Michael Lind on the Vietnam War—and bring sharp perspectives unclouded by any personal involvement. David Allyn, a Princeton history instructor born in 1969, has composed a history of the sexual revolution, which by his chronology ended in the early eighties, when he was barely adolescent. "Make Love Not War," subtitled "The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History" (Little, Brown; $26.95), comes with a prodigious bibliography and marches us through the revolution campaign by campaign.

The opening shot, in Allyn's account, was the publication, in 1962, of Helen Gurley Brown's "Sex and the Single Girl," which proposed that single girls had a right to sex and urged its female readers to "accept all the parts of your body as worthy and lovable . . . your reproductive organs, your breasts, your alimentary tract." Brown, an Arkansas native with a lively sexual history before she married at the age of thirty-seven, had been persuaded to write the book by her husband, a movie producer, and she went on to edit *Cosmopolitan*, turning it into a monthly "self-help manual for the sexually active woman." Yet, Allyn tells us, she "never claimed to be a radical"; she denied advocating promiscuity, weakened her critique of the sexual double standard with an "enthusiasm for expensive cosmetics and plastic surgery," and allowed her publisher to delete from her book a section on birth control. Nor was Brown's battleground quite virgin soil; it had been softened up by such best-selling barrages as the former zoologist Alfred Kinsey's "Sexual Behavior in the Human Female" (1953), which reported that roughly half of the five thousand nine hundred and forty white American women Kinsey interviewed admitted to premarital sex and a quarter to extramarital affairs, and Grace Metalious's novel "Peyton Place" (1956), which dramatized females as both sexual victims and sexual aggressors.

Allyn's next chapter begins with Rudi Gernreich's perpetration, in 1964, of the "monokini," a gawkily strapped topless swimsuit that never caught on except in the publicity mills; more significant innovations surely were the first Playboy Club, in 1960, and the first topless dancing, by Carol Doda at the Condor Club, in San Francisco's North Beach district, in 1964. All could be grouped under the heading of commercial sexual display—not exactly revolutionary in themselves but made so by the vocabulary of civil rights with which they were, with frequent success, defended from the forces of censorship.

A few extra degrees of male titillation on beaches and in drinking clubs did not, however, transform the American bedroom; the middle-class masses were liberated by the Pill, an oral contraceptive licensed by the Food and Drug Administration in 1960. Allyn writes, "The pill, a synthetic estrogen taken once a day, at any time of the day, separated the act of intercourse from the use of birth control. With the pill, contraception became 'clean.' " He quotes the philosopher Ashley Montagu: "In its effects I believe that the pill ranks in importance with the discovery of fire." Montagu saw it as ending the male's "predatory exploitative attitude toward the female" and enabling the over-all "rehumanization" of mankind. Montagu proved optimistic: the Pill turned out to have deleterious side effects for many women, as did the I.U.D., a squiggly-shaped intrauterine contraceptive device absent from Allyn's history. Both inventions, though, were unmitigated boons for men, relieving them of dependence on condoms and depriving women, whether wives or mistresses or fresh acquaintances, of one

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of the two time-honored reasons for saying no to sex, the threat of pregnancy. The other threat, venereal disease, had by the early sixties been marginalized by cheap and effective antibiotic treatments for syphilis and gonorrhea. To glance ahead in our story, the revolution faltered when, in 1979, a viral disease, genital herpes, emerged to defy any antibiotic cure; it was followed by the realization, in the mid-eighties, that a fatal virus, H.I.V., communicated from bloodstream to bloodstream through sex or intravenous injection, was killing tens of thousands around the globe. The sexual revolution was an enchanted interval of technological permission, in a country prosperous enough to give pleasure some major attention. At its peak, it was spurred, if spur were needed, by the rebellious, reckless mood induced in young people by the Vietnam War. "Make love, not war" became a chant—as if people hadn't been doing both for millennia.

Allyn's rather relentless, rat-a-tat survey leads us into a number of semi-forgotten byways. Who but the most ardent social historian or revolutionary sentimentalist remembers Jefferson Poland, the founder of the New York

A scene from "Oh! Calcutta!" (1969): Was the sexual revolution an enchanted interval?

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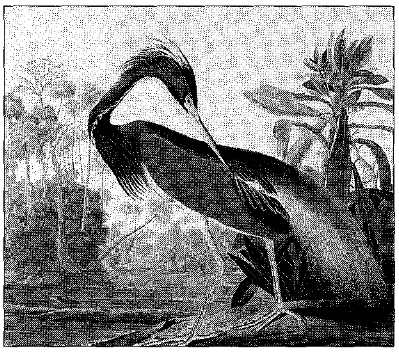

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League for Sexual Freedom, later the national Sexual Freedom League—one of the first men to wear flowers in his hair and the organizer of a goosebumpy "nude 'wade-in' " at a San Francisco beach in 1965? Or Craig Shoomaker, the founder of Homosexuals Intransigent!, who in the organization's newsletter denounced bisexuals as intolerably impure, proclaiming, "I hold it against a man's tongue that it has slithered over a clitoris; I hold it against his penis that it has gotten itself coated with the sebaceous lubricant of a vagina"? Or Dr. David Reuben, the psychiatrist author of the best-selling "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex . . . But Were Afraid to Ask" (1970), which amid much carefree misinformation recommended Coca-Cola as a contraceptive douche, hymning the spermicidal action of its carbonic acid without mentioning the risk of peritonitis or a fatal gas embolism? And who wants to remember the significant sexual component of the civil-rights movement? Allyn asserts:

> As white female civil rights volunteers arrived in the South, they faced what was known as the "sexual test": repeated sexual propositions from black men in the movement. If women refused the propositions, they were "racist"; if they consented, they were labeled promiscuous, and they also invited the wrath of black women.

Stokely Carmichael, the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coördinating Committee, is quoted as saying, "The only position for women in SNCC is prone"; I remember it as "on their backs." The sixties counterculture was mostly a male trip. "Peace, Pussy, Pot" was a gender-biased slogan, and one female hippie reminiscently complained in an interview: "The guys fucked like rabbits—in, out, in, out. It was so boring you could die."

As well as collecting much piquant ephemera of the revolution, the author details such lasting breakthroughs as the beautifully named legal case, in 1967, of Loving v. Virginia (Richard Loving, a white brickmason who had married a black woman, against the State of Virginia), in which the Supreme Court struck down the miscegenation laws still on the books of sixteen states. Then there were the Barnard College protests of 1968, after which colleges across the country relinquished restrictive parietal rules and the in-loco-parentis philosophy behind them. Written and filmed pornography, stage nudity, communal cohabitation in the sixties, group sex in the seventies—all get their chapter.

Allyn has been zealous in the pursuit of interviews; his bibliography lists eighty-three. One of the most vivid witnesses to bygone good times is Howard Bellin, a plastic surgeon who, with his wife, Christina Paolozzi, an Italian countess and fashion model, explored Manhattan high society and the expanding sexual frontiers simultaneously. "Once I had six women in bed at the same time," he testified. "It was not wonderful. How do you keep six women focused on sex all at the same time? Maybe three at one time, but the other three would be talking." On another occasion, he was in bed with his wife when an emergency call came through: "I got a call from my friend Bob. It was two-thirty in the morning. He said he had two girls at his place and he was too tired but they wanted more." Bellin declined, but his wife overheard the conversation and said, "Don't be stupid. Go, have fun." Between fun and drudgery, the line could be fine. Bellin estimates that he had sex with more than a thousand women. There is no testimony from those who went under his surgeon's knife the morning after an especially active night. But he himself—his wife, whom he divorced and then remarried, is now dead of a brain tumor—testifies, "The bottom line is, it didn't work. I never thought my kids knew, but they did and they resented it. In a way, I regret it. If we had really worked to stay together and not done all this craziness, it would have been better for the relationship."

But it is a rare person who would give back his or her sexual experiences. Amid all the damage to marital and social commitments, people felt happier for having more, and more various, sex. Mimi Lobell, a Manhattan architect and swinger, recalled her first threesome, with her husband and a female student of his: "It took forever and forever and forever for anything to happen. We were just too nervous; we didn't know how to break the ice. . . . Finally we did and it was wonderful and we felt fantastic and in love with the world." In this very magazine two months ago, a male professor in a short story by Alice Munro remembers the cultural moment when "young girls with long hair and sandalled feet were coming into his office and all but declaring themselves ready for sex":

> A whirlwind hit him, as it did many others. Scandals burst wide open, with high and painful drama all round but a feeling that somehow it was better so. . . . What he felt was mainly a gigantic increase in well-being. . . . He ran up steps two at a time. He appreciated as never before a pageant of torn clouds and winter sunsets seen from his office window, the charm of antique lamps glowing between his neighbors' living-room curtains, the cries of children in the park, at dusk, unwilling to leave the hill where they'd been tobogganing.

It was as Freud had said: happiness is sexual happiness. Allyn discusses spun-off Freudians like Wilhelm Reich and Norman O. Brown but has little to say about Freud himself. Yet it was Freud's blessing that drove and empowered the American sexual revolution. Everybody had heard of him; almost everybody had been exposed to a smattering, enough to believe that sexual repression was bad. In his 1908 paper " 'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness," Freud stated that psychoneuroses "originate in the sexual needs of unsatisfied people." In 1909, delivering the third of his "Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis" in Worcester, Massachusetts, he told his audience:

> First and foremost we have found out one thing. Psychoanalytic research traces back the symptoms of patients' illnesses with really surprising regularity to impressions from their erotic life . . . . It forces us to suppose that among the influences leading to the illness the predominant significance must be assigned to erotic disturbances, and that this is the case in both sexes.

In "Civilization and Its Discontents" (1930), the "pattern for our search for happiness" was defined as sexual love: "Happiness, in the reduced sense in which we recognize it as possible, is a problem of the economics of the individual's libido." These dicta, detached from Freud's wryly stoic pessimism and his careful tone of exploratory empiricism, flavored myriad sessions of psychotherapy and impromptu applications of what Hugh Hefner was proud to call "*Playboy* philosophy." Good sex became, in this puritan country, a new work ethic.

The righteous hunt for healthful satisfaction was on, and pity the child, par-

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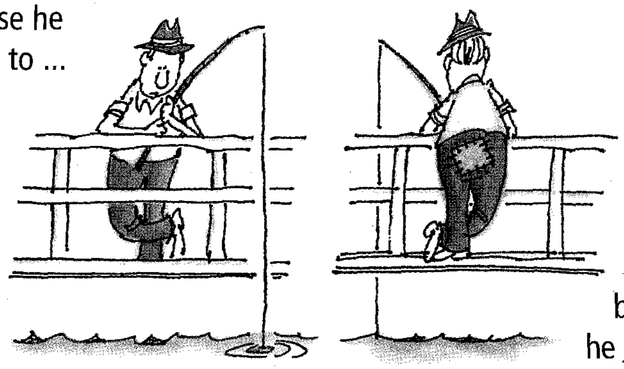

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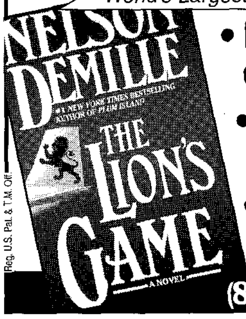

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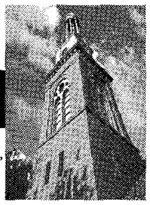

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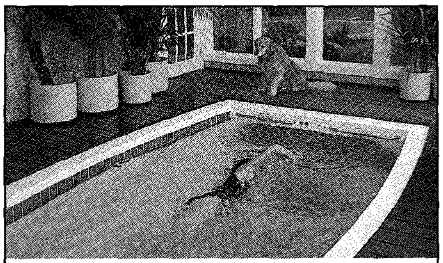

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ent, or marriage vow that got in its way. One didn't even need to be liberal to join in; a series of articles in the Chicago *Daily News* in 1967 exposed swingers as Midwestern squares. Allyn says, "Often very conservative in politics and dress, swingers tended to establish and follow strict rules in their sexual experimentation. . . . Suburban swingers, unlike their fellow hedonists the hippies, tended to be preoccupied with hygiene and cleanliness, scrubbing and polishing their homes to eliminate every possible germ before guests arrived for a sex party. They treated sex like any other form of suburban recreation." The American booboisie satirized by Ring Lardner and Sinclair Lewis had found a pastime to replace Saturday-night bridge, but in other respects kept their meliorism. "Swinging," a contented Indiana housewife called Eunice told Allyn, "brought us all much closer together than we would have been otherwise."

On the other hand, sexual acting-up was one of the armaments with which the far left hoped to blow up American society. Bernardine Dohrn, of the violent Weatherman faction, wore a uniform that "consisted of a black miniskirt, leather boots, and a button reading 'Cunnilingus is Cool, Fellatio is Fun.' " Another collective, based in permissive Amsterdam, called itself Suck, and included for a time the future cultural theorists Andrea Dworkin and Germaine Greer. Dworkin wrote that "sucking must be seen in and of itself as an act of political significance" and, later, having moved beyond sucking to "androgynous pansexuality," theorized that lifting all taboos, including those against pederasty and bestiality, would lead to "the development of a new kind of human being and a new kind of human community."

The envisioned utopias tended to sour, as did urban attempts to provide, for an admissions fee, sex-abundant zones. The New Jersey investment banker Steve Ostrow created the Continental Baths in the basement of the West Side's Ansonia Hotel; for a time it became a fashionable night spot for gays and straights, and it gave Bette Midler her start as a cabaret entertainer. Ostrow rhapsodized, "The Continental has grown full with love, like my life! The world comes here now to feel the release of decades of pent-up sexuality, all those years of inhibition are splattered, if you will, against my walls!" But the gay men moved on—too many straight couples horning in—and the Baths were sold, to become the briefly successful Plato's Retreat, where the famous could be seen naked and partners could be randomized under strobe lights.

Sex has an exhibitionistic component, but more in this regard may amount to less. Isadora Wing, Erica Jong's faithfully libidinous heroine, in "Parachutes and Kisses" visits a "mattress club" called Eros Anonymous and "her distinct impression was that religious orders ought to send monks there in order to help enforce their vows of chastity." Jong herself, in her memoir "Fear of Fifty," remembers visiting Plato's Retreat with her then husband and finding the layout grungy: "We wandered from the spa room (scummy water, pimply bodies) to the snack room (peanut butter and jelly, bologna and mustard—as at some very déclassé kids' party), to the mat room (dentists from New Jersey hydraulically screwing their hygienists)." In one of "Make Love Not War" 's sadder personal anecdotes, the pseudonymous Jody West relates how her liberated parents talked incessantly about sex and invited her to watch them have it (she refused). When she brought her first date home, her father "put condoms on every bed in the house. I was so embarrassed I wanted to cry." Allyn abandons his interviewer's role to confide that when he was twelve his father and stepmother recommended that he have sex with a prostitute: "I was left with the feeling that we would never be able to understand one another; that if I were going to talk to someone about my sexual feelings and experiences, it would never be with either of them." Freud pointed out, in his 1912 paper "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life," that sexual energy needs to be conserved:

> Some obstacle is necessary to swell the tide of the libido to its height. . . . In times during which no obstacles to sexual satisfaction existed, such as, may be, during the decline of the civilizations of antiquity, love became worthless, life became empty, and strong reaction-formations were necessary before the indispensable emotional value of love could be recovered.

Reactions to the sexual revolution arose in the nineteen-seventies from a resurgent evangelical Christianity

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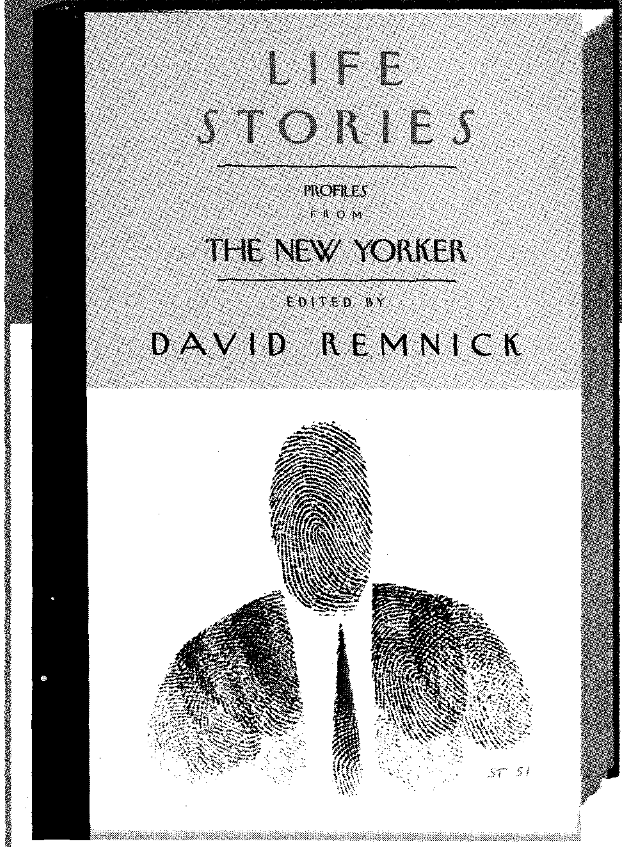
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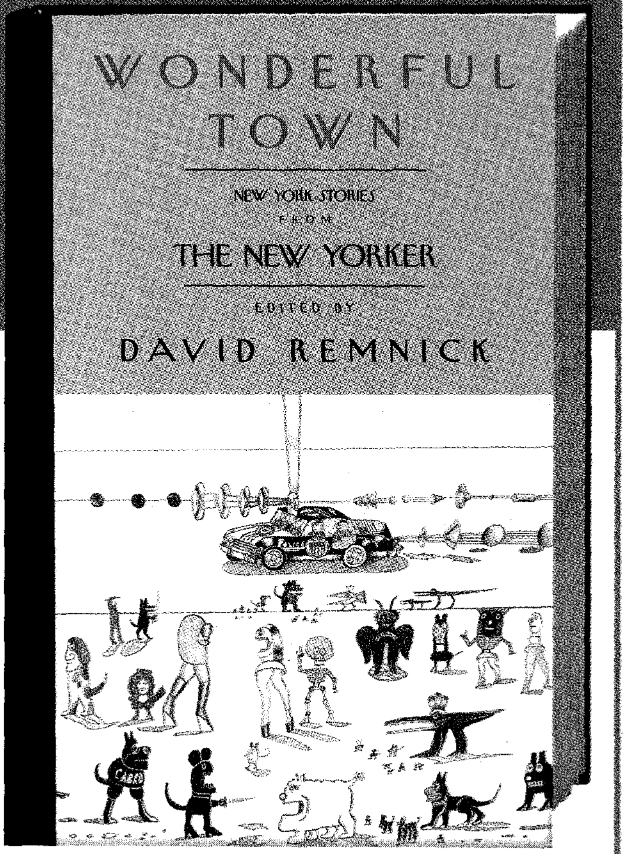
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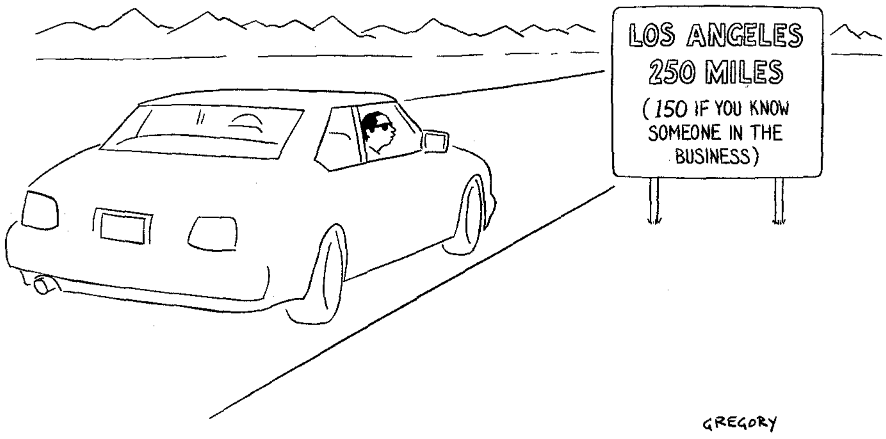
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(though a few evangels were caught with their pants down) and from anti-pornography feminists. The weakening, inflationary economy dampened the mood. Sexual liberation began to feel rotten from within. Larry Flynt's *Hustler* ran photos of naked prepubescents and a regular comic strip called "Chester the Molester." Linda Lovelace, the child-faced heroine of the first great porn hit, "Deep Throat," revealed in a 1980 autobiography that she had been beaten and threatened with a gun by her husband to compel her compliance while making indecent films. The law began to stir again: "Deep Throat" 's hero, the megaphallic Harry Reems, was arrested in his New York City apartment and extradited to Tennessee, where, in 1976, a Memphis jury found him and eleven other defendants guilty of obscenity. (The conviction was later overturned.) In 1974, the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of a San Diego publisher, William Hamling, who had brought out an edition, with hard-core illustrations, of the report of the Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. If the Court's 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, legalizing abortion, was, as Allyn writes, "the crowning achievement of the sexual revolution," the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, which ran out of time in 1982, with only three more states needed for ratification, was the legal triumph of the counterrevolution, led in this instance by Phyllis Schlafly, who claimed that the amendment would "destroy the family, foster homosexuality, and hurt women." So, even without the emergence of herpes and AIDS, "by the early eighties, the sexual revolution was out of steam."

David Allyn likes the image of running out of steam enough to use it at least three times. While one must admire the wealth of detail and documented anecdote that fuels his steamy narrative, there is something mechanical about his take on this, after all, intimate and fleshly change. The live creature within the exoskeleton of headlines and communiqués remains elusive. Allyn's skirmish-by-skirmish military approach does best with those movements within the revolution which led a minority—gay men, lesbians—to achieve, through organization, alliance, pronouncement, and confrontation, some public acknowledgment of its equal rights. The battle for legal recognition of same-sex couples, with all the benefits society bestows on heterosexual couples, still goes on, but anyone alive in the forties and fifties, when homosexuals of either gender were objects of coarse fun and frank abhorrence, will see at century's end an improved, relatively accepting situation, however marred by incidents of gay-bashing.

For the heterosexual mainstream, the main news is that the sky did not fall in. Huge Technicolor genitals appeared on movie screens, Henry Miller's "Tropics" novels freely circulated, young couples took to living in what used to be called "sin," polymorphous perversity was preached and practiced, and yet the society continued to function, and people in

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love tended to create nuclear families. Grandmothers, when an adult grandchild brought a friend to visit, adjusted to letting them sleep in the same bed—indeed, the grandmothers, if they had been flappers in the twenties, or war brides in the forties, had seen something like it before. Allyn does not entertain much suspicion of a cyclical pattern in social mores, each generation seeking to correct the perceived errors and excesses of the preceding. To him, as in Philip Larkin's poem,

> Sexual intercourse began
> In nineteen sixty-three
> (Which was rather late for me)—
> Between the end of the Chatterley ban
> And the Beatles' first LP.

The decades of my own youth are flatly "the repressive forties and fifties." Indeed, as Allyn's introduction states, "it is necessary to appreciate that real sexual repression was always a threat in the 1940s and '50s. That is to say, the state reserved the right to repress sexual deviance and dissent." Reserved it but exercised it with more caution and flexibility than a child of the sixties might think. Policing sexual behavior is a hopelessly huge task, and few organized societies are so ignorant of human needs as not to build in some leeway for the sex drive. The Puritans had their bundling; the most straitlaced rural communities had square dances and haymows.

How repressed were we, back in those benighted forties and fifties? I do not recall feeling more repressed than was good for me. Even without reading Freud one knew that civilization demanded some control of the libido. The extensive, elaborate "necking" and "petting" whereby adolescents kept their virginity but expressed their heat were what is now fashionable as "safe sex." My parents, who had courted and wed in the Roaring Twenties, sometimes offended my childish prudery by wandering around naked upstairs. They never, to my memory, made an admonitory remark (or any kind of remark) about masturbation, and, insofar as dating discipline was attempted, it was in the name of preventing my premature marriage. The old repressions were occasioned by real threats and honest fears, which have been eased less than the revolutionaries expected. The enemy was not a set of aliens out there, denying and scolding; the enemy was us, our sexual inhibitions locked in for self-preservative reasons. And these inhibitions, it might be said, generated a poetry of pervasive eroticism. The sideways glance, the glimpse of underwear, the whiff of perfume, the perhaps accidental touch, the intimacy achieved bit by bit, like a painstaking mapping of the heavens—all this would be forfeit in a Plato's Retreat of consummation on demand. We value what we need to fight for. Secrecy is a great aphrodisiac. The Victorians made much of an exposed ankle, the Japanese of the nape of a woman's neck. If every beach becomes a meaty sprawl of near-nudity and every date a compulsory copulation, we risk allowing sex to seem paltry. ◆

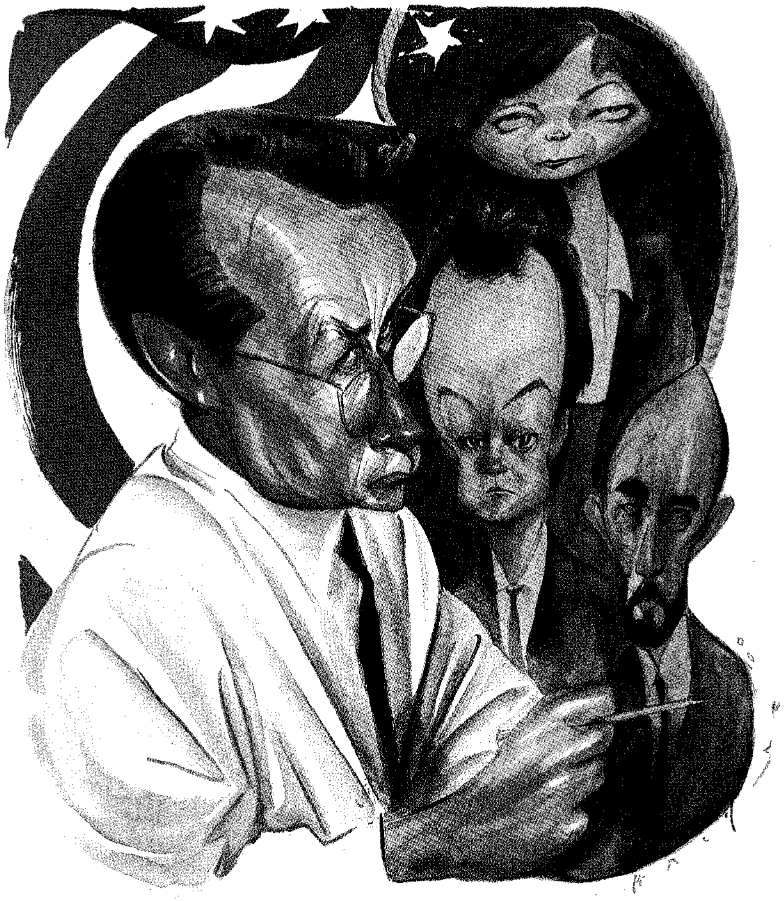
ON TELEVISION

CORRIDORS OF POWER

Spin doctors and damage control in the White House.

BY NANCY FRANKLIN

I've been told by people who know what they're talking about that the NBC show "The West Wing" presents a highly idealized view of the workings of the White House. It rings of truthfulness, though. It may not be realistic, but it feels real, and it feels right—if this isn't what the White House is like, it's what it *should* be like. The show's generally terrific cast further promotes the illusion of verisimilitude; though many of the actors are familiar from other roles, they make you feel as if the characters they're playing here actually existed before the show. "The West Wing" focusses not on the President (note that it's not called "The Oval Office") but on the members of his senior staff, and the show's drama



"The West Wing" makes viewers feel as if they had a ringside seat in the Oval Office.

STEVE BRODNER

and its comedy lie in their interactions with one another and their attempts to juggle the conflicting demands of politics and governing. There is, needless to say, a certain amount of tension among them—at one point, the deputy chief of staff erupts and calls the press secretary a "paranoid Berkeley shiksa feminista" and she, returning the favor, calls him an "élitist Harvard fascist missed-the-dean's-list-two-semesters-in-a-row Yankee jackass"—but essentially everyone, as they say around the White House, is on the same page. (Everyone, that is, except the Vice-President, who helped the President win the nomination and as payback demanded the job; he is as welcome in the Presidential offices as the flu.) They are where they are not because of personal ambition but because of a desire to do good.

If this isn't seductive enough all by itself, the show even manages to make these people, and their work, seem glamorous. They're all witty, quick on their feet, effective, and attractive. And their leader, President Josiah Bartlet, a liberal Democrat, a former governor of New Hampshire, and a Nobel Laureate in economics, is a man you can believe in. He's played by Martin Sheen, who by now knows his way around the nation's capital: he has previously played John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and John Dean, and he narrated Oliver Stone's "JFK." In Rob Reiner's 1995 movie "The American President," which was written by Aaron Sorkin, the creator of "The West Wing"—and of "Sports Night"—Sheen played Michael Douglas's chief of staff. Bartlet may not be the main character in "The West Wing," but he is the eight-hundred-pound gorilla, and Sheen is so good in the role that you feel his presence even when he is offscreen. Bartlet has those qualities we think of as Presidential: an ego the size of Mt. Rushmore, an exquisitely calibrated common touch, and enormous drive and conviction. (One Presidential trait he lacks is a wandering eye; he is happily married to his mostly absent wife, a doctor, played by Stockard Channing.) He also has a sense of humor about himself. In the pilot episode, Bartlet doesn't appear until a few minutes before the end of the show. He walks into his office and interrupts a dispute between his staff and

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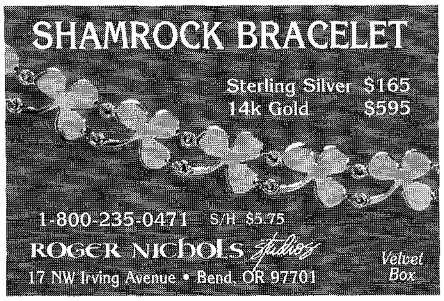

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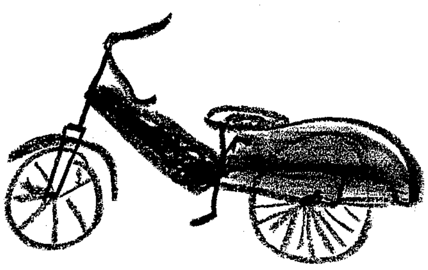
some disgruntled fundamentalists about what the First Commandment says. Before we see Sheen, we hear his booming voice, declaiming, "'I am the Lord your God. You shall worship no other God before me.' Boy, those were the days, huh?" And Bartlet is the ultimate compartmentalizer and multitasker: In an episode revolving around a state dinner, the President has to deal with several crises: not only does the guest of honor not like what's on the menu but the Teamsters are threatening to strike, a hurricane is nearing a naval fleet, and there's a hostage situation in Idaho.

Sorkin's script for "The American President" may have been a kind of warmup for "The West Wing," but the structure of the show bears more resemblance to that of "Sports Night." Sorkin creates drama with the pacing of the scenes and the speed of the banter. As in "Sports Night," the characters do a lot of hall-walking-and-talking; in the dizzying rush of these scenes, they manage to be both glib and germane at the same time. While all the wisecracks are poppin', we're aware that the game they're playing is one of very high stakes. In one scene, C. J. Gregg, the press secretary (the fabulous Allison Janney), collars Josh, the deputy chief of staff (Bradley Whitford, also fabulous), and says to him, "There's an article I want you to read in *The New Yorker*." He says, "What's it about?" She: "Smallpox." He: "The disease?" She: "No, the dessert topping." (Perhaps our national motto should be changed from In God We Trust to Bada-Bing, Bada-Boom.) Sarcasm is what the West Wing staffers use to regulate the pressure in their lives. In this show, even dialogue that might be considered filler—that is, it doesn't advance the story—serves to intensify the crackling, under-the-gun atmosphere. At one point, Josh's assistant, Donna (Janel Moloney), sticks her head in her boss's office and sees that he's having an intense tête-à-tête with Sam Seaborn, the deputy communications director (Rob Lowe). Her curiosity is piqued:



> DONNA: What's going on?
> JOSH: Nothing.
> DONNA: Really?
> JOSH: Yes.
> DONNA: You're lying?
> JOSH: Yes.
> DONNA: So I should get out?
> JOSH: Yes.

As it happens, the conversation that Donna wants to listen in on has to do with a sticky situation that Sam is in—a woman he slept with, he discovered the next morning, is a call girl. (As is remarkably often the case with TV and movie call girls, and hardly ever the case with actual call girls, she's working her way through law school.) It was a funny, and clever, move to put Sam's innocent lapse in the pilot episode, for it right away acknowledged and then neutralized the lingering aroma of ridiculousness and cheesiness which has clung to Lowe ever since the public became aware of a videotape he made of two women having sex (one of them a minor) while he was attending the 1988 Democratic National Convention. Lowe is good in this role, and part of his appeal is his willingness to play along with the joke.

Sorkin said in an interview in the Los Angeles *Times* last year that he loves "smart, quick, flawed characters," and he has created a number of them here, but he also excels at inventing characters who have a darker psychic coloration, such as Toby Ziegler, the communications director (Richard Schiff). Toby seems constitutionally heavy of heart, and he moves and speaks slowly and deliberately, as if he were wearing gravitas boots. Schiff is wonderful in the role; he's both dour and droll, and you hang not just on his every word but also on his silences. Leo McGarry, the loyal, gruff chief of staff (John Spencer, of "L.A. Law"), is like a dad from an earlier era—he bears the weight of the world on his shoulders and doesn't readily air his problems in front of his children, the senior staff. Leo's "flaw"—he is recovering from both alcoholism and Valium addiction—was the occasion for the one truly unbelievable moment in the show so far. In a recent episode, a young woman in the White House personnel office is found to have leaked confidential information about Leo's treatment to a con-

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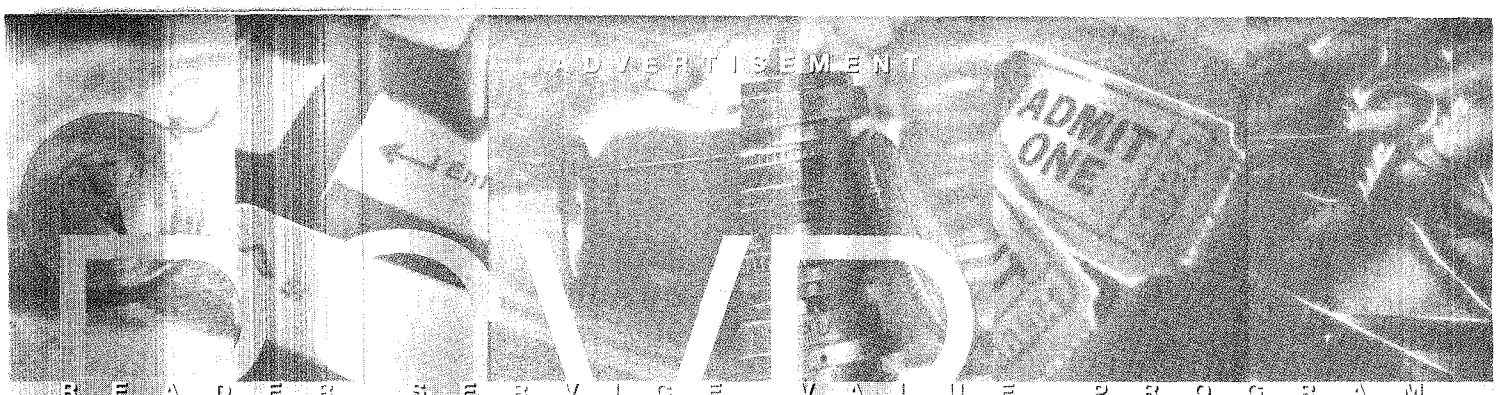

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gressman and is summarily fired; Leo asks to talk to her before she leaves the premises, and as she stands in front of his desk with her box of belongings she tells him that her father had a drinking problem, too. Leo, uttering some bromides about second chances, summarily rehires her. My guess is that when you get fired from the White House you probably stay fired. Recent evidence seems to indicate that the only person in the White House who gets to screw up and be granted a second chance is the President.

"The West Wing" deals with real issues, such as hate crimes and gun-control legislation, and also with issues of perception—which, in politics, are no less real. The general citizenry is not privy to the fine details of spin-doctoring and damage control in the White House—what we glimpse is probably the tip of the iceberg—but "The West Wing" makes viewers feel as if they had a ringside seat in the Oval Office. There's a good reason for that. The show's consultants include Dee Dee Myers, President Clinton's first press secretary, and the Democratic pollster Patrick Caddell (who also advised Warren Beatty while he was toying, or whatever you want to call it, with the notion of running for President); and Lawrence O'Donnell, Jr., who once served as chief of staff of the Senate Finance Committee (and who recently became *New York's* political correspondent), is an executive story editor. (C.J., the press secretary, may even be modelled to some extent on Myers: C.J. and a reporter in the White House press corps have an ongoing flirtation; Myers is now married to a New York *Times* reporter who was the paper's White House correspondent when she worked for Clinton.) In an episode for which Myers and Caddell got story and script credits, President Bartlet is about to put forward a nominee for the Supreme Court whose respectable credentials and upper-class pedigree will supposedly insure a smooth confirmation but whose illiberal judicial record makes him less than ideal. When the retiring Justice berates Bartlet for his choice—for going straight to the middle of the road—he impatiently explains that he has to contend with "an opposition Congress, special interests with power beyond belief, and a bitchy media." The President has been in office for a year at this point, and has to start thinking about midterm congressional elections and his own reëlection. In the end, Bartlet makes the "right" choice—which is the only choice the public will ever know about. But we, the viewers, have been shown the back-story and have seen up close the kind of compromises that come with governing the country. We've seen how important ends justify painful or expedient means. "The West Wing" is very good when it comes to laying out the politics of politics while still showing government service as a worthy, and even noble, pursuit. It can make you wish you had chosen that path for yourself—you'd surely be a better person for it, and, who knows, it might even have led to a job on a really good TV show someday. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

JUST LIKE REAL LIFE

Zhang Yimou on the road; Anna Deavere Smith and David Hare onstage.

BY DAVID DENBY

A hundred years ago, when movies were in their infancy, it was never written in stone or anywhere else that the new art form had to yield "Die Hard 2" or "Scream 3" or any other narrative laid out in temporal sequence. In the early days, the camera simply recorded events—the ocean rolling in, a train entering a station, an actor standing on a stage. It was D. W. Griffith, most centrally, who pushed movies into storytelling. Griffith worked out a cinematic language that could accommodate and heighten the emotional storms of the Victorian theatre—suspense and pathos, melodrama and "identification." He created the means to make art, and to make junk, too—

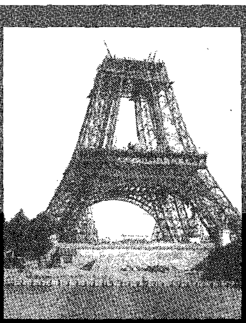
RICCARDO VECCHIO

both the heart-stopping spectacle of human freedom enmeshed in inexorable destiny and the crude, exaggerated manipulation of action and emotion which leaves us exhausted and vaguely disgusted.

The great Chinese director Zhang Yimou, who went through an early, spectacular phase with films like the 1991 "Raise the Red Lantern," now appears to be working in a style one can only call austere fabulism. In "Not One Less," he has seized on true accounts of runaway children in China's impoverished countryside to tell the story of a quiet and determined thirteen-year-old girl who is temporarily put in charge of a one-room village school, and who then sets out to find a missing student. What's fascinating and touching about the new film is how skillfully Zhang plays with both the artifice of "story" and the recalcitrant physical matter of China at its most impressively drab. The movie is a hybrid: it's either a fictionalized documentary or documentary fiction (take your pick). Zhang cast nonactors—a teacher, the village mayor, a clerk—who play characters with the same or similar jobs. He shot parts of the movie in a squalid mountain village whose dirt roads and gray concrete walls and general forlornness bear a heavy weight of ugliness. In movies, misery as well as beauty can satisfy our primal sense of the way things really are. In this case, we are convinced that we are looking at an instant rural community, put up during some Maoist great leap, in all its ghastly mediocrity.

As the movie opens, Wei Minzhi, who is, in real life, a thirteen-year-old student, is summoned by the village's blustery mayor. A problem has arisen: the school's regular teacher is leaving for a month to care for his dying mother. The children must stay in class, even if they do nothing more than copy lessons put on the board by this silent girl, who is only a few years older than the noisy little schoolkids. As the departing teacher instructs Wei Minzhi on her duties, her beautiful face remains neutral. In "Not One Less," the Chinese seem a harsh, abrupt people, with little desire or need for kindness or even manners, and at first we can't tell how much of Wei Minzhi's blankness is

Wei Minzhi as a teen-age girl at the center of Zhang Yimou's "Not One Less," which mixes authenticity and fable.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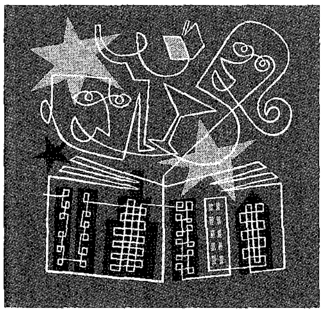

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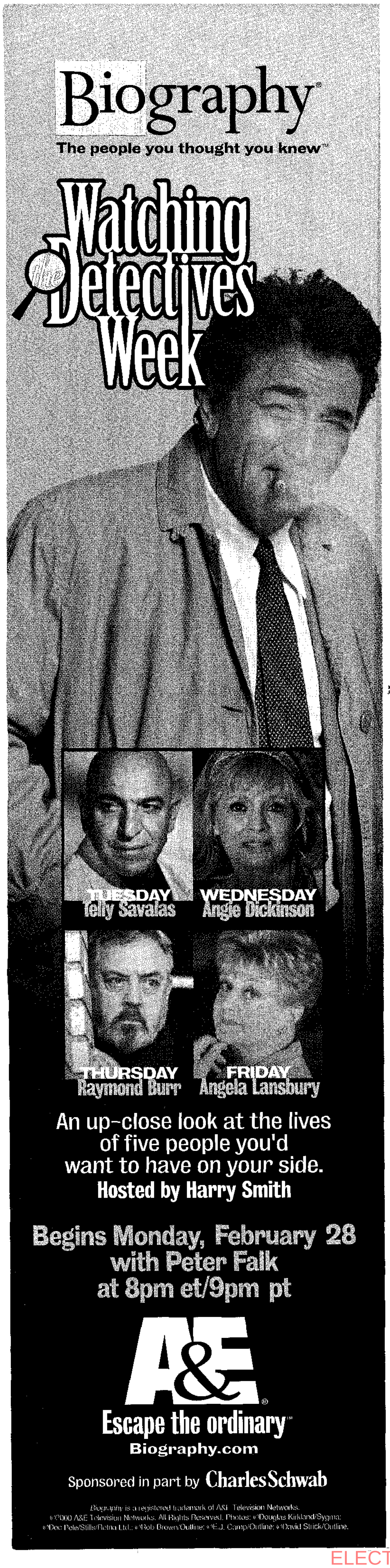
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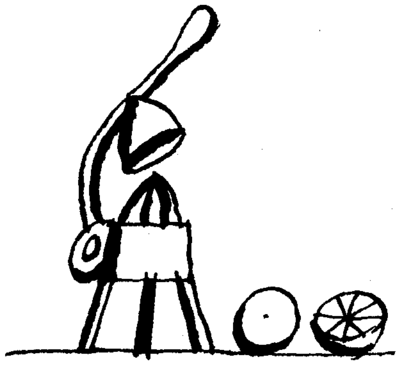
"cultural"—a kind of inner discipline schooled by toughness—and how much of it is the nervousness of a young girl standing in front of a camera. Whichever it is, the initial blankness works. Later, when she does begin to feel something, the emotion appears abruptly, like a semaphore arm swinging down. Wei Minzhi and the others do not have the rounded responses of trained actors. How could they? They offer us intention and will; they state their emotions rather than re-creating them in the fluid Western style of nuance and conflict. Driven by story and physical movement, "Not One Less" becomes, willy-nilly, a believable record of real people behaving as they think they should in a given situation—a sly exposure of the stresses and conformities of Chinese society.

Before the teacher leaves, he tells Wei Minzhi that twelve children have disappeared already that year, and she must not let any more run away. One of the boys, Zhang Huike, a ten-year-old troublemaker who is more playful than vicious, disobeys and leaves the school, though for a very good reason—his family can't pay its debts, and he needs to go to the city to work. Good reason or not, Wei Minzhi is devastated, and, like Porgy in search of Bess, she sets off in pursuit, tramping the roads toward the nameless city without the slightest idea where to look for the boy. She doesn't have any particular connection with Zhang Huike; she may not even like him. But she struggles to fulfill her duty and perhaps to find herself as well as the boy.

At that point, Zhang's narrative instincts take over and "Not One Less" becomes a fable of dedication, a kind of slow-motion chase movie. The dirt roads, the gray walls, the recalcitrant children, the rude and demanding people, and then the nameless, overcrowded city, with its bicycles and scooters and its general air of furious bewilderment, all become vibrantly active background for the kind of heart-wrenching story that D. W. Griffith had in mind. We think of Chaplin's tramp on the lonely road, or the Italian neorealist films, with their exhausting street scenes and their lost individuals desperately trying to find a niche somewhere. I was reminded, too, of Zhang's earlier movie, "The Story of Qiu Ju," in which a pregnant wife who sets out to redress an injury suffered by her husband—he has been kicked in the balls by a minor official—winds up hounding every bureaucrat she meets until she gets an apology. The heroism of female mulishness means a great deal to Zhang Yimou, and the impassive style of the movie only adds to the bravery, which, in its persistence, takes on a tone of hilarious monomania. In the city, looking for the boy, Wei Minzhi blindly goes from one strategy to another, applying herself like a beaver to a tree. Zhang Huike, meanwhile, finds no work and survives by eating scraps of food left behind on restaurant tables. Ignorant but determined, teacher and student struggle among the city crowds. Their lives teeter on the edge of dissolution, with only Zhang Yimou's loving gaze holding them back from the awful brink.

If movies are the sensuous and kinetic medium par excellence, the theatre has always excelled as the arena of debate, of public accountability and poetic fervor. At the recent Sundance Film Festival, two of the most arresting movies were records of high-voltage theatrical pieces—documentaries devoted to a staged event in which a creator-performer used all the powers of voice and manner to bathe us in large public emotions. In "Twilight: Los Angeles," which will be seen on PBS next season, Anna Deavere Smith impersonates the many voices—combatants, victims, observers—of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, taking on the swagger of a gang leader, the pained outrage of a Korean woman who has lost her store, the chattering fearfulness of a Beverly Hills real-estate agent. Smith first presented this material onstage



the year after the riots. For the movie, the director Marc Levin added footage of the burning city, but the heart of the piece is still Anna Deavere Smith sitting or standing on a set with just a prop or two, her hair up or down, a jacket quickly removed or added. Smith's work is fuelled by mockery and sympathy mixed together, and her immersion in the expressive being of her subjects breaks one's heart and gives one hope at the same time. As she performs, lending herself equally to opposing points of view, one is forced into bitter acknowledgment: virtually all communication, we realize, is self-serving; "truth" is a function of perspective. No matter how many times one has heard or thought this before, it remains an appalling insight. This time, however, it is quickly followed by a soothing corollary: if one person, like Smith, can encompass so many furious kinds of subjectivity, then perhaps reconciliation among enemies is still possible.

The British playwright David Hare may also have reconciliation in mind, as an ultimate aim, in his superb theatrical monologue "Via Dolorosa," another of the Sundance films. (This movie should turn up on public television, too, but there are no current plans to distribute it theatrically, which is a crime.) Hare has performed the work in both London and New York; the movie version was shot (by the great cinematographer John Bailey) at the Booth Theatre. Hare enters through a door at the rear of the stage and speaks without stopping for about ninety minutes. He wears a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves and dark pants, but as a performer he is naked, unaided, with nothing but voice and body providing emphasis and punctuation. In the past, I must admit, I had trouble taking David Hare as seriously as I was supposed to. He seemed to me a bit of a blowhard, a theatrical heavy-breather pumping up such plays as "Plenty" and "Amy's View" until the material was commensurate with his outsized sense of moral alarm. But in "Via Dolorosa" he has found a big subject at last, one that doesn't require pumping. He recounts a trip he made several years ago to Israel, re-creating his wanderings for us, incident by incident, encounter by encounter, harangue by harangue. He talks to fundamentalist Jews among the West Bank settlers, to peaceniks in Tel Aviv, to furious Arabs, to Palestinian intellectuals disgusted with Arafat, and Hare, electrified and amazed, holding forth at a pitch of anguish and triumph, is home at last, happily alive in the realm of incandescent emotion. The people speak through him; he is their advocate, their impartial tribune, as well as their surrogate. One can learn quite a bit about Israel from "Via Dolorosa," but the movie is most exhilarating as a documentary celebration of a theatre man aloft, soaring in full flight.

In the past, sulfuric acid seemed to bite into Michael Douglas's soul and sharpen his intelligence—he could be mean, paranoid, and vindictive, yet never slow—but now the acid has apparently completed its work, and left behind someone who has been worn, if not smooth, at least mellow. A good actor who has never quite received the praise he deserves, Douglas, now fifty-five, gives a surprisingly mild and witty performance in "Wonder Boys." He's Grady Tripp, pothead campus novelist and hero to undergraduates, a writer who once produced a book that meant something to people. Incapable of finishing his new work, Grady runs into every kind of trouble, and Douglas makes him a rueful near-failure, bitter but gentle, angry at himself but accepting of others. The movie itself, an adaptation of Michael Chabon's novel (Steve Kloves did the screenplay; Curtis Hanson directed), is a companionable but distinctly minor affair. Nothing in it makes much sense, or really matters, but the time passes, as they say, pleasantly enough. ♦

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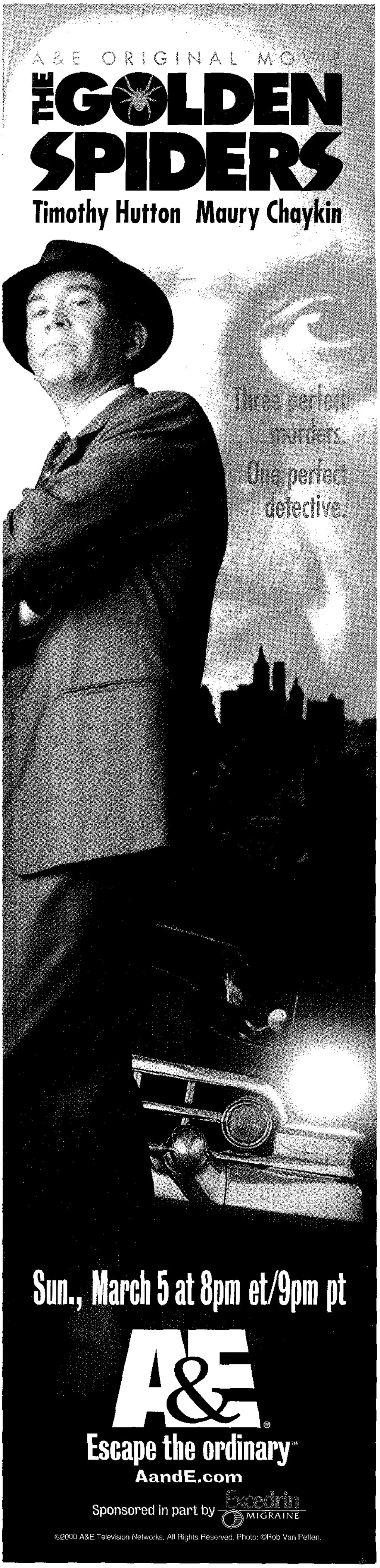
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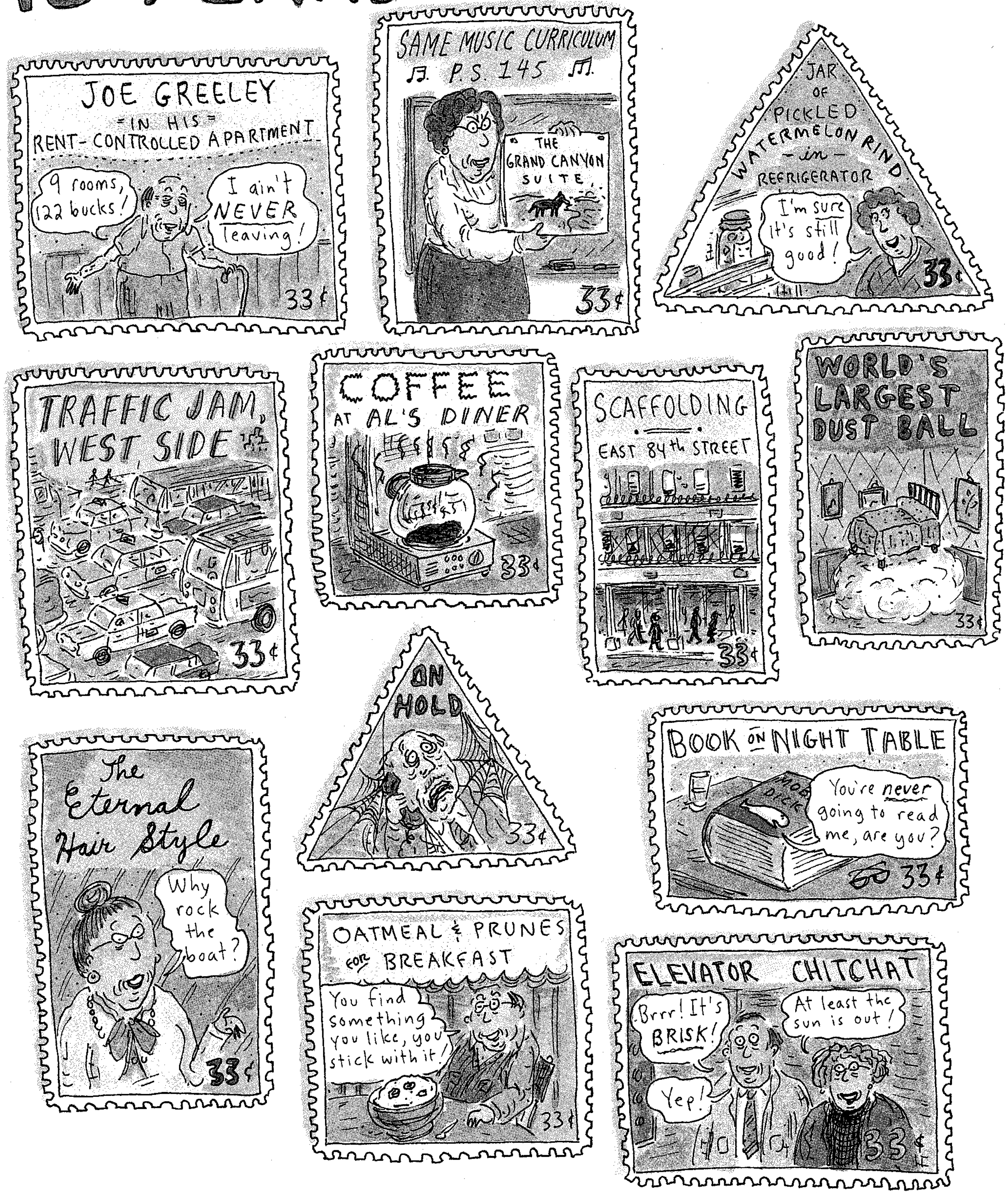
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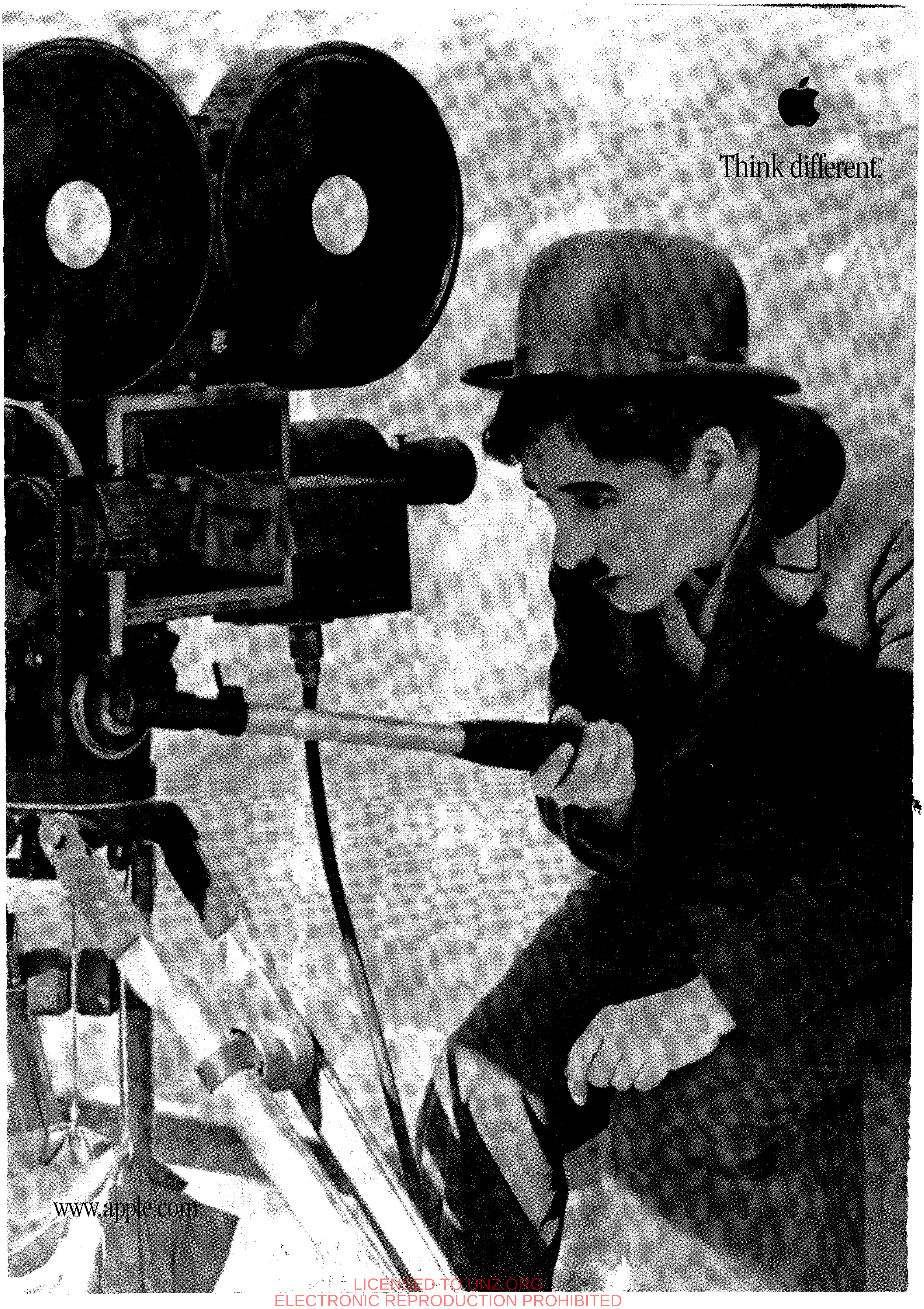
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